

Horror
Films
of
2000
—
2009



John Kenneth Muir

Horror Films of 2000–2009

ALSO BY JOHN KENNETH MUIR AND FROM MCFARLAND

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Front cover: Sid Haig (as Captain Spaulding) in *House of 1000 Corpses*, 2003 (Lion's Gate/Photofest)

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To my son, Joel Muir, who was born in 2006, one of the years covered in this book. Becoming Joel's father has helped me to see horror movies in new and deeper ways. And now, he is at the age, finally, to watch them with me.

And also, for Mormo. She is the family cat that broke her leg during the fall of 2020 and sat on my lap, wearing a cast and an e-collar, as I wrote much of this tome.

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Preface

To alter slightly a line of dialogue from *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002), horror films represent “the great white shark of our unconscious.”

And it's time to go swimming again.

I return to you—writing in the age of pandemic—with this volume, my fourth horror decade survey book from the good folks at McFarland. The book you now hold in your hands, *Horror Films of the 2000s*, follows the award-winning *Horror Films of the 1970s* (2002), *Horror Films of the 1980s* (2007), and *Horror Films of the 1990s* (2011).

This book surveys approximately 315 movies from the first decade of the 21st century, the War on Terror Age, and provides a thumbnail history of that epoch. As was the case in my previous decade surveys, the films included herein are dated by the year of *American wide theatrical release or direct-to-video release*, not the year of limited release or copyright.

This organization differentiates these books from the useful and long-lived Internet Movie Database, which lists films by their copyright date. As noted in *Horror Films of the 1990s*, the movie-going experience forges indelible memories. Audience members recall the occasion, date and season during which they first experienced a film in the theater. They recall a summer movie from a summer viewing, not six or nine months previous to their first encounter with it. These big decade books attempt to recreate, after a fashion, the “time” of the movies and the world around these releases, so this organization by release date hopefully makes intuitive sense to readers.

In terms of scope, *Horror Films of the 2000s* highlights representative horror films released theatrically and direct-to-video from the year 2000 through the year 2009. Important films from Japan, France, Korea, Great Britain, and other nations are included throughout the text as well. A look at these films is especially important in this particular decade as Japanese Horror and the New French Extremism influenced American horror filmmaking in myriad ways. But as before, the book's approach is America-centric. Made-for-TV films or so-called TV movies, as before, are not included.

Also, a bit of special pleading: please understand the use of the word “representative” above. This book attempts to be thorough but does not include every title ever. In part, that is so because not every fan or academician even agrees on what qualities define horror. What one reader may see as an oversight, another might see as a fantasy film, and therefore not the purview of this text.

The films are further organized in the text by alphabetical order within each year, and all entries follow the same formula pioneered by *Horror Films of the 1970s* so that all four of these books may be viewed as companion pieces; pieces of a larger whole, a sweeping history of horror films in the intriguing last decades of the 20th century and turbulent first decade of the 21st century. Each entry features a cast and crew tally, a synopsis and a detailed commentary.

Readers will also find, as before, a “Timeline” at the start of each year of review, as a reminder of what was happening in the larger world alongside the release of the surveyed horror films. At the heart of all these books is the notion that current events shape art or that art imitates life. Therefore, movies cannot be fully understood and appreciated unless viewed with an understanding of their historical context. Put short and sweet: context explains to us why a film looks and sounds as it does.

Some readers decry that these decade books discuss politics all, but the fact is that all art is political. Accordingly, all horror films are political. And they all relate directly to the world in which they were forged. Going back to the formation of film as an art form, the horror genre has never been not political, and that certainly doesn't change with the horror films of the 2000s.

Or to quote *Scream 3* (2000), “pop culture is the politics of the 21st century.”

No doubt some readers will tire of reading about the “post 9/11” world in this book, yet it would

be derelict not to consider how the horror film changed following a devastating terrorist attack on American soil.

As before, I am not alone in my journey through a decade of horror films. To quote a tagline from *Aliens* (1986), there are some places in the universe you shouldn't go alone. This time, I have four stellar guest

critics to offer their commentary on many of the films of this decade.

These horror rock stars are (in alphabetical order):

William Latham: Bill Latham has been writing capsules of horror films since the first book in this series, *Horror Films of the 1970s*, twenty years ago. He is also the author of a number of novels including *Mary's Monster* (1999) and several officially licensed novels based on the TV series *Space: 1999* (1975–1977).

Stacie Ponder: Stacie Ponder is a writer, artist, and podcast host whose work focuses on horror movies and horror video games. In addition to her long-running, critically acclaimed blog *Final Girl*, her work has appeared in numerous publications and websites.

Jonas Schwartz: Jonas is a contributing film critic to *TheaterMania*, *Broadway World*, *Arts in LA*, and this author's blog, *Reflections on Film and Television*. Jonas is also the author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Alexandra West: Alex's work has appeared in *The Toronto Star*, *Rue Morgue*, *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, and *Shock Till You Drop*. Her books *Films of New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity* (2016) and *The 1990s Teen Horror Cycle: Final Girls and New Hollywood Formula* (2018) are available from McFarland.

The critical reception section for each film, where these capsules are found, also include representative reviews from other critics. In this case, the author has included not just magazine and newspaper reviews, but excerpts of horror blogs and sites, which proliferated in the 2000s and commented meaningfully on the genre.

The synopsis, of course, is a short recounting of a film's plot. In some cases, there are spoilers in the synopsis, so that narrative and theme can be discussed in the commentary. The commentary section is my detailed analysis of the film in the spotlight. As before, I have rated the films on a four-star system, with four meaning "great," three stars meaning "good," two stars being "average" and one star and under being "poor." The two-and-half-star writing is simply authorial waffling, a film that is almost good but not quite so. Some readers may draw that line differently.

Finally, readers will find several appendices at the end of the book that, as before, categorize genre conventions or tropes, look at oft-seen performers, catalog tag or ad lines for the films covered, and a personal selection of the ten greatest horror films of the 2000s.

Happy reading ... and see you for the 2010s!

I

Whoever Wins, We Lose: An Introduction

The American horror movie has always known what scares us.

Two further statements help the reader understand the American horror film format during the turbulent first decade of the 21st century.

The first statement, written in this author's *Horror Films of the 1970s*, and repeated in each succeeding text in this survey series, is simply that art always reflects life. By this, the author means only that one cannot hope to meaningfully interpret any work of art without understanding the time period from which it sprang. Historical context is the key to unlocking the meaning and nature of horror films.

There are many horror films fans who would prefer not to linger on politics, or presidents, or foreign policy in an examination of the genre. Yet, artists consciously and unconsciously mirror what they witness happening in the world around them, so current events and politics are inexorably linked to horror films. Why interpret horror films at all if not to link them to the boogeymen and dreads that lurk in the culture?

The horror cinema of the 2000s obsessed on terrorism, technology, and fate, to name three obsessions of the era. Of the three hundred plus films featured in this book, the majority contend with at least one of these concepts.

The second statement of vital interest in this survey of the horror films of the aughts is simply that bad times make for good horror films.

The 1970s, the disco-decade era of Nixon's impeachment, the Vietnam War, the Three Mile Island Disaster, the Iranian revolution, and OPEC oil embargoes, gave the world such undisputed masterpieces as *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) and *Halloween* (1978).

The apocalypse, Cold War mentality of Reagan's conservative, yuppified 1980s, as well as the rise of AIDS and a burgeoning national debt, generated classics like *The Thing* (1982), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and more.

However, following the first Iraq War in the 1990s, came an economic boom in America under President Bill Clinton. This era also saw the rise of the Internet, and of the dot.coms. Peace and prosperity were the order of the decade, and horror movies didn't know exactly where to turn in an era that lifted all boats.

Serial killers? Interlopers? Self-reflexive neo-slashers?

At the same time, a brilliant genre TV series, *The X-Files* (1993–2002), began to dramatize well-shot, effective horror narratives each week during the decade. Why drive to a theater and pay top dollar to see a new horror movie, when *The X-Files* could be enjoyed from home, and watched for free?

Where was the horror movie headed at the dawn of the new millennium?

In the largest, most sustained economic expansion and “*peacetime boom*”¹ in American history, thanks to the commercial engine known as the Internet, was there still a place, still a role, for dark cinematic entertainment and creepy imaginings?

The widely held belief that America was safe and secure, and that even party politics didn't matter in an age of plenty played out in unusual fashion in the Presidential election of 2000. Vice President Al Gore, a fact-based number cruncher and wooden “*policy wonk*,” and Governor George W. Bush of Texas, an incurious, born-again Christian who couldn't name prominent world leaders, were candidates for the highest office of the land. Although these candidates were incredibly different in demeanor,

knowledge, and belief systems, the overwhelming feeling of the American populace nonetheless was that the men were pretty much the same. So, the winner of the contest ultimately didn't really seem to matter much.

The 2000 election was not about war and peace, Social Security, or universal health care. Instead, Election 2000 was about, literally, which candidate you would rather share a beer with.

This is not a joke.

A poll conducted by Sam Adams Beer on October 17, 2000, found that more Americans would enjoy a beer with Bush (by a margin of 40 percent to 37 percent) than with Gore. Gore did, however, beat out Bush with women on the same question, in the same poll, by 5 percentage points.² One in five voters was undecided between the two men as election day neared, and PBS maintained an undecided voter log that captures the minutiae and unimportance of the election. Undecided voter Kim Pepple wrote in this undecided voter log: *"If I need a teammate for a game of Trivial Pursuit, I'd want Al Gore to be my partner. If I wanted to relax and enjoy myself after the game was over, I'd seek out George Bush."*³



No matter who wins, we lose! The Predator (left) comes face to face with the xenomorph (right) in *AVP* (2004) or *Alien vs. Predator*.

The “beer” presidential election of 2000 question came up again, coincidentally, five days before Election Day, when the mainstream press broke the story that Bush had once plead guilty to driving a vehicle under the influence of alcohol, when he was thirty years old.⁴ Since he was running on “*restoring honor and dignity*” to the White House after the stain of Clinton’s 1999 impeachment over the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the revelation of his own indiscretion didn’t play well with the American people, and the candidate lost ground in the polls.

As a result, perhaps, of this late revelation, Election Night 2000 was a nail biter. The contest was bitterly fought, and no winner was announced. Instead, there seemed to be voting logjam in Florida, which would give its winner 29 electoral votes. Florida also happened to be the state where Bush’s brother, Jeb, served as governor, and Katherine Harris was Secretary of State ... and a Bush campaign co-chair.

Recounts were held in heavily Democratic counties as Al Gore attempted to close the 537-vote gap representing George W. Bush’s lead. Unwilling to see those recounts succeed, Republican operatives launched the Brooks Brothers Riot on November 22, 2000, to disrupt the counts. Among those protesting at this “spontaneous” demonstration were several well-known political operatives, including “dirty tricks” master, Roger Stone,⁵ later a campaign manager for Donald Trump.

Finally, the Supreme Court of the United States stopped the recounts with a controversial decision, *Bush v. Gore*. The court justices who had been nominated for the court by George W. Bush’s father, President George H. Walker Bush just a decade earlier, did not recuse themselves from the case, and voted in W’s favor. After the Supreme Court forestalled further avenues to determine the accuracy of the Florida vote count, Al Gore conceded the election on December 13, 2000, stating “*Almost a century and a half ago, Sen. Stephen Douglas told Abraham Lincoln, who had just defeated him for the presidency, ‘Partisan feeling must yield to patriotism. I’m with you, Mr. President, and God bless you.’ Well, in that same spirit, I say to President-elect Bush that what remains of partisan rancor must now be put aside, and may God bless his stewardship of this country.*”⁶

George W. Bush became President of the United States on January 20, 2001, though some voters still referred to him as “*The Commander and Thief*” and protested his inauguration by throwing eggs at his motorcade.⁷ Overall, however, the American people hardly seemed bothered that not all the votes had been accurately counted. Again, most Americans felt like there simply wasn’t that much at stake, or much difference between the country’s two political parties.

The 21st century was going to be another American century, it seemed certain.

What did Americans even have to fear anymore?



Evil will fight evil—two more cinematic monsters go head to head in the 2000s. This time, it's Krueger (Robert Englund, left) vs. Voorhees (Ken Kirzinger, right) in *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003).

The unfortunate answer to that question arrived on Tuesday, September 11, 2001. Radical Islamic terrorists working in an organization called Al Qaeda, under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden, used hijacked airliners to attack America. They flew their planes into buildings and brought down the World Trade Center in New York. One of the planes struck the Pentagon in VA. And the last plane went down in a field in Pennsylvania, after brave American citizens sought to retake control of the cockpit.

News footage of the attacks repeated endlessly, for days, on 24-hour news cable stations such as Fox, MSNBC and CNN. Americans saw grieving family members searching in vain for the missing, presumed dead, from the Towers. They also witnessed conspicuous courage from first responders, working at the scene of the crime in Manhattan, which became known as Ground Zero.

President Bush, addressing the U.S. Congress, and the American people, remarked upon the unprecedented nature of the terrorist strike on September 20, 2001: "*Americans have known surprise attacks, but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day, and tonight fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack.*"⁸

America had suddenly been dragged into the 21st century, against her will, and now, it must be stated there was much to fear.

Under President George W. Bush, America launched a new, sweeping Global War on Terror. It was

a campaign that, in keeping with the so-called Bush Doctrine, would authorize pre-emptive attacks against any state that harbored or helped terrorists. Those countries who did so, he declared, were either with us, or with the terrorists.

After a War in Afghanistan against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, which failed to capture the terrorist mastermind, Bin Laden, the Bush Administration set its sight on a second theater in the War on Terror: Iraq. The motivation for this war was the fear that secular dictator Saddam Hussein was gathering weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that he would use to attack America. Administration officials went out to the media, including National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and commented that they didn't want "*the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud*" over American cities.⁹

America's new culture of fear had arrived in force, nuclear Armageddon included.



Two more evils duke it out: The Pred-alien (left) and a Predator (right) are up for a rematch in *Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem* (2007).

In March of 2003, The Bush Administration launched a pre-emptive war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, even though it had no verifiable links to Al Qaeda, or the 9/11 terror attacks. A Pentagon report issued in 2007, as well as the September 11 Commission report, "found no evidence of a collaborative relationship between Saddam and Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda network."¹⁰ Instead, it was part of an "Axis of Evil," and marked for invasion.

America seemed to change overnight after 9/11 and the beginning of the War on Terror.

A draconian Patriot Act was passed by Congress, and the Department of Homeland Security, a vast new bureaucracy, was created to defend the nation. The American populace was suddenly conditioned to the new culture of fear by the arrival of a color-coded terror threat chart. This color-coded chart would tell Americans when to be afraid, or, actually, very afraid.

Green meant low risk of terror attack. Blue meant general risk of Terrorist Attack. Yellow meant elevated risk. Orange meant high risk, and Red blared severe risk of terrorist attack. Years after the 2002 initiation of this system, the first Homeland Security Secretary, Tom Ridge, reported that *"he was pressured by other members of George W. Bush's Cabinet to raise the terror alert just before the 2004 presidential election."*¹¹

America under Bush also found itself chipping away at old international alliances, as it pushed for its War on Terror, particularly the Iraq War. When the Administration couldn't gain support from traditional allies such as France and Germany for a pre-emptive attack there, those allies were dismissed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld as *"Old Europe"*¹² In one especially ridiculous move, a protest arose in America to change the name of French fries to *"Freedom fries"* to snub France.

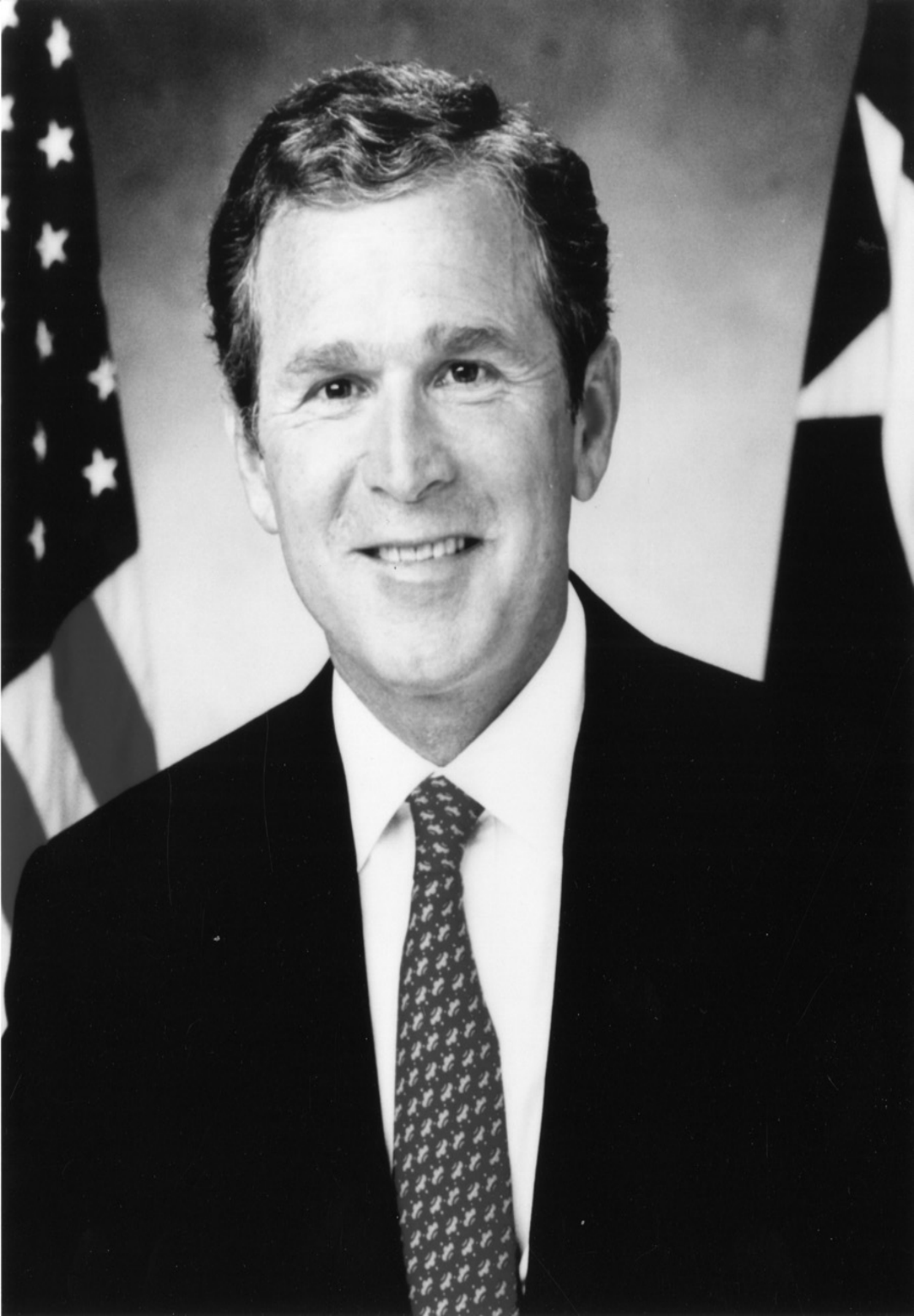
Once the war in Iraq was started, new controversies swelled. There were reports of Americans torturing prisoners, for example, in Abu Ghraib prison, in 2004. The torturers were dismissed by Bush as *"a few bad apples."*¹³ Others, including prominent civil rights and constitutional lawyers saw the abusive and illegal behavior as clearly stemming from the fact that the Attorney General of the United States under Bush, Alberto Gonzalez, *"authorized some of we've been talking about, some of these torture techniques. So you have essentially, a hermetic system, closed in terms of any accountability."*¹⁴

Much horror followed the 9/11 attacks and the initiation of the War on Terror. There was a terrorist attack using anthrax, still unsolved and unprosecuted as of this writing. Then came the Washington Beltway Snipers. In 2001, the Enron Economic collapse occurred.

In 2005 came the drowning of an American City, New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina and a failed government response. Nearly two thousand Americans died as a result of this natural disaster and its aftermath.¹⁵

And, last but not least was the Great Economic Collapse of 2008. This financial crisis was the worst economic disaster since the Great Depression.¹⁶ Unemployment swelled to 10 percent, with 15 million Americans out of work, by 2009.¹⁷

This is just a God's Eye overview of the upheavals that created tumult in America and across the globe during the aughts.



George W. Bush, 43rd President of the United States.

But remember the second statement, above, about the nature of the horror genre. Bad times make good horror movies. It's as though the horror film needs something controversial, provocative, or at the very least, unknown, to occur in the culture for the format to truly reach its zenith of creativity and social relevance.

And that is precisely what happened in the decade of the aughts. Bad times fueled visions of unparalleled darkness and terror at American cinemas. But these visions, importantly, were also a mirror, showing America its true nature through the prisms of war, recession, natural disaster, and a red state/blue state partisan divide that threatened to shake the U.S.A. apart.

For example, the 9/11 attacks and ensuing War on Terror forged a whole new wave of horror films that involved innocent travelers take a wrong turn into terror. The road trip gone awry or "detour" horror film was a format already well-established before the 21st century, but 9/11 infused it with a new relevance. After the terrorist attacks, Americans too felt like they had taken a detour into an alternate reality, one in which their illusions about safety, security, or prosperity were all shattered.

Just as American workers had gone to work in Manhattan on a seemingly normal September morning in 2001 only to be faced with horrific choices (burn to death in the towers, or jump to their deaths, from a high floor in the towers...), so were the protagonists of these films, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Wrong Turn* (2003), *Wolf Creek* (2005), and *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006) forced to make consequential choices about their lives that had not even been in consideration when they awoke that day.

Many of those road trip horrors also involved the concept of *blowback*, a term first used by the CIA in 1954. It describes a process, simply, of people receiving a horrific comeuppance because of their previous actions or behavior. This notion of blowback also played out on the international stage as American culpability for the 9/11 attacks was examined. Many pundits saw the attacks as an act stemming from its long-standing imperialistic foreign policy in the Middle East. "...[W]e are badly mistaken if we think that we in the United States are entirely blameless" for 9/11 wrote Chalmers Johnson in "Blowback," for *The Nation* on September 27, 2001. "The suicidal assassins of September 11, 2001, did not 'attack America,' as our political leaders and the news media like to maintain, they attacked American foreign policy."¹⁸

In the remake of *The Hills Have Eyes*, for instance, the antagonistic cannibal family became mutated and scarred when the United States government had conducted atom-bomb testing on their homes, in the early part of the 20th century. Economic shutdowns in rural areas, blowback from American domestic policy, generated the terrors of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Wrong Turn*, landing murderous blowback at the feet of the unsuspecting, wayward travelers.

Not only are these films about people taking a "wrong turn" into terror, but specifically about them paying the price for policies conducted in their name, if not by their permission. The road-trip gone wrong films of the 2000s echoed America's experience leading up to September 11, 2001. The country was driving along, enjoying the ride, musing about which presidential candidate to share a beer with. They believed that life was safe and secure. But as they soon learned, there were landmines ahead.



The 9/11 terrorist attacks brought a shift in TV programming. Programs that were suspicious of the Federal government and posited global conspiracies, like the popular *The X-Files* (1993–2002) starring Gillian

The Bush Administration's policies and actions regarding prisoners of war in the Iraq War on and War on Terror led to another notable trend in American horror films of the 2000s: "torture porn," or films in which protagonists are sadistically made to suffer harm to body and soul. Via the writing of White House counsel (and later Attorney General) Alberto Gonzales and also John Yoo, America opted out of the "*quaint*" Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners in wartime, objecting to them on the basis that the terrorists were not soldiers in a traditional conflict.¹⁹

This new approach opened the doorway to the usage of "*enhanced interrogation techniques*" on prisoners in American custody. "*Enhanced interrogation techniques*" was a euphemism, for torture.

On TV, the hit series *24*, starring Kiefer Sutherland, also transformed the horror of torture into a heroic and patriotic occupation. Sutherland played Jack Bauer, a counter-terrorist expert who, in order to prevent another 9/11 styled terrorist attack, resorted to the torture of his enemies, and his prisoners. The worst part of this fictional storytelling was that in *24*, the torture worked, and America received the information needed to prevent more large-scale attack. In real life, the evidence suggested the contrary. A 6,000-page report to Congress, filed in 2014 by Glenn Carle, suggested that the CIA's "*harsh methods*" during the War on Terror "*failed to glean any intelligence not available through softer tactics*."²⁰ By indulging in torture in reality, and in popular entertainment like *24*, the national bloodlust for revenge was at least partly sated, without actually being an efficacious process for intelligence gathering.



After the September 11th attacks, TV series such as *24* (2001–2008), starring Kiefer Sutherland as Agent Jack Bauer, became popular. The series was controversial for its suggestion that torture was a successful interrogation technique.

America's new obsession with water-boarding and other forms of torture reached its crescendo when on April 30, 2004, reporter Seymour M. Hersh broke a story about the treatment of prisoners by the U.S. Military at a prison in Iraq called Abu Ghraib. (Seymour M. Hersh: *The New Yorker*: "Torture at Abu Ghraib," April 30, 2004); There, prisoners had been stripped naked, sexually humiliated, and otherwise been subject to the enhanced techniques of the so-called Torture Memos.²¹

The torture porn horror movies of the 2000s found Americans suffering another form of blowback. The protagonists in these films were brutalized and maimed by insidious foreign agents in efforts such as *Hostel* (2005), and *Hostel II* (2007). Other films, including *Otis* (2008) found Americans doing the torture themselves—to fellow Americans—as a kind of "*monkey see, monkey do*" response to the pop culture and the tacit approval of the Bush Administration's approach to interrogation.

The popular *Saw* movies likewise saw Americans tortured and having to choose between "evils" (like losing a family member or cutting off one's own foot at the ankle). This was an acknowledgment, perhaps, that America was not going to survive the 2000s and the War on Terror without losing pieces of herself.

Here's the ironic thing about torture porn horror films and the aughts, however. It quickly became

the most derided sub-genre since the Moral Majority's (and Roger Ebert's) sustained attacks on the slasher films of the 1980s. Torture porn was attacked in America as disgusting, immoral, and perverse, even by some horror-loving writers in the genre blogger.

Yet, again, it is important to remember the historical context. America had legalized torture and practiced it at Abu Ghraib and other locations., The series 24 had popularized it, to great ratings. The blockbuster religious epic, *Passion of the Christ* (2004), even sanctified it, in a sense. When horror films explored the morality of torture, and depicted its horrific and traumatic effects, however, they were attacked and ridiculed, not lauded for commenting on the society that had, clearly chosen to condone the activity as the price for liberty. A country that tortured, a country that watched torture for pleasure, did not want to be confronted, apparently, with the actual moral implications of that activity.

Ronald Reagan had once termed America a shining city on a hill, but in the War on Terror Culture of Fear, America appeared ready to sacrifice her ideals of freedom and justice for all, overturning international agreements about treatments of prisoners, and more. This was an acknowledgment of weakness, above all. America, the Bush Administration apparently believed, had to sacrifice the things that made the country great to beat the terrorists, and so rose the era of "*It takes evil to fight evil*" horror movies.

The 2000s feature many films in which heroes must align with "evil" forces to survive the day. The battle is no longer, as it had been traditionally, between good and evil.

Now it is just evil vs. evil.

In *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), for instance, the teenagers terrorized by Freddy Krueger worked with Jason Voorhees, the hockey-masked killer of the *Friday the 13th* series, at least briefly, to stop the more powerful dream demon. In *Alien vs. Predator* (2004), a human explorer teamed with the predators, aliens renowned for skinning their human hunting trophies, to defeat the chest-bursting, face-hugging, acid-spewing xenomorphs.

Again, the galvanizing theme of the aughts was that to win a conflict of extreme danger, like, say, the War on Terror, a protagonist (for instance, America) was going to have to work with an evil force or in league with evil to succeed in its cause. As America sold her soul to win the War on the Terror, horror movies of the era began to recognize that peace and prosperity was no longer a guarantee, and that, worse, the idea of America as being on the side of the angels was no longer operative, either.

A number of films of the era, including *High Tension* (2005), for example, positioned the monster and the final girl in the same physical body, making these identities inseparable. Good and evil were housed in the same individual.

In the year of 2004, the Bush vs. John Kerry election, *Alien vs. Predators* was released, and was advertised with a line that best describes the horror films of the 2000s:

"Whoever wins, we lose."

The animated series *South Park* offered a notorious episode in that span that compared the Bush vs. Kerry contest to choosing between a "*douche*" or a "*shit sandwich*," another way of reiterating the "Whoever wins, we lose" paradigm.

How did this happen? It began to dawn on many Americans mid-decade that the soul of their country had been stained by its prosecution of the Iraq War, and like the blood on Lady Macbeth's hands was not going to easily or quickly wash off. Bush wasn't going to change course, and Kerry, in trying to beat him, felt like "*Bush Lite*," not offering the country a different or new path.

The culture of fear seemed here to stay.

A sad fact, of course, was that America had been here before, and failed to learn the lessons of the past. The Bush Administration failed to learn the difficult lessons of the Vietnam War, and so the War in Afghanistan and War in Iraq continued year after bloody year, a quagmire of sorts.

Bush also revived the mythology of the Reagan Revolution and trickle-down economics, lavishing tax cuts on the rich while breaking the American treasury.

Consider: the 2000s had a re-run Bush, a rerun foreign quagmire in Iraq, and even a rerun space shuttle disaster (the 1986 *Challenger* incident vs. the 2003 *Columbia* one). Perhaps it is not a surprise then that so many of the horror films of the 2000s were "*brand name*" remakes of classic films, even as

Bush was a “brand name” president, following the legacy of his father.

Everything old was new again (or not) in horror remakes including *The Fog* (2005), *The Omen* (2006), *Halloween* (2007) *The Hitcher* (2007), *When a Stranger Calls* (2008), *Prom Night* (2008), and more. Although many remakes did have merits as individual works of art, the War on Terror Age felt much like America was reliving its worst previous mistakes, suffering a poisonous hangover case of *deja vu*. The best of the remakes, such as Alexander Aja’s *The Hills Have Eyes* or Zack Snyder’s *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) were able to recontextualize their stories for the new traumas of the aughts.

The “*Whoever wins, we lose*” paradigm might also be seen in the other horror film trends of the 2000s. A number of movies concerned new and improved technologies coming into everyday use but failing to make life any better. This was a relevant terror, because the 2000s was the incipient era of iPhones, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, and other avenues of communication “connection.” More often than not in horror movies of the era, these technologies brought evil into the American home.

FearDotCom (2002) and *Cry_Wolf* (2005) concerned the ways evil could be housed on and proliferate across the Internet. *The Ring* (2002) concerned a haunted video tape. *Pulse* (2006) and *One Missed Call* (2008) obsessed on evil as carried through cell phones and Wi-Fi. *28 Days Later* showcased “the rage” developed in people from a constant viewing diet of Cable TV news, and *Pontypool* (2009) focused on a zombie apocalypse born by the “risky” language of talk radio. Films like *Stay Alive* (2007) obsessed on a haunted video games, and the message overall seemed to be that the new technological 21st century was a place of danger, both online and off.

We couldn’t have nice things. The nice things would kill us. So, on one hand, we had amazing new technologies, and on the other, they didn’t seem to be protecting us, or making life substantially better for Americans.

Whoever wins, we lose.

In the 2000s, another technology—the video camera—became widely available and affordable, and the way that horror movies could visualize their stories underwent a fundamental shift. Following *The Blair Witch Project*’s (1999) blockbuster success at the end of the 1990s, the found-footage horror film format took off in the 2000s, taking the “amateur” chronicler of current events into every kind of crisis imaginable.

Remember, in the hours after the 9/11 attacks, 24-hour cable networks endlessly showcased amateur footage of the people on the ground in Manhattan, running from debris and smoke plumes, and the towers on fire.

That paradigm of the bystander capturing history was repeated ceaselessly in the aughts in such found footage efforts of the 2000s as *REC* (2007), *Diary of the Dead* (2008), and *Cloverfield* (2008) to name just a few. In these films, the technological medium was the message, to coin a phrase. The proliferation of home video camera technology meant that no event in American history would ever again go unrecorded, undocumented.



The poster art from *Cloverfield* (2008), showcasing the fact America—and New York—have been attacked again.

By the late 2000s, Americans had grown tired of war and economic chaos. Americans voted Republicans out in the congressional elections of 2006, and elected Barack Obama as President in 2008, but by then the damage was done. Americans had lost faith in the idea that their government could protect them or help them during a disaster.

This fear was given voice in the zombie films of the 2000s including *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *28 Weeks Later* (2007)—which was a commentary on the Iraq Occupation, *I Am Legend* (2007), *Planet Terror* (2007), *Pontypool* (2009), and *Zombieland* (2009) to name just a few of these efforts. The old monster, the zombie, had come back, but this time to represent the failure of infrastructure and bureaucracy to save the American people. In these tales, scientists, the military, the government and the media were helpless to stop an onslaught, a new order, in the American homeland.

It was the fear, made manifest, of American decline in a decade in which one crisis followed the next. By and large, the zombie films represented the idea that America could no longer respond effectively to foreign attack, internal strife, or even a natural disaster.

As one can tell, there was a whole lot to be scared about in the 2000s, and the new millennium horror films went for the gusto, exploiting fear of terrorists, fear of societal collapse, fear of innovative new technology, and even fear of political blowback over decades of bad foreign policy.

For America, it was the worst of times, but for horror films, it was the best of times. The genre had once more found its voice and its purpose.

So, with these social and political currents and ideas in mind, let us return now to the decade of cargo pants and frosted lip gloss, Bratz dolls, and MySpace.

It was the era when political candidates could claim relevance by using a “*noun and a verb and 9/11*” in their stump speeches, and torture porn, found footage and remakes of beloved films reigned supreme in the horror genre.

Too soon?

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II

The War of Terror: A Decade of Torture Porn Remakes, Zombies and Other Trends

“If you found this tape, if you’re watching this right now, then you probably know more about it than I do”:—Found Footage

At the end of the 1990s, the horror film genre had a new, runaway hit in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), a film that grossed hundreds of millions of dollars on a budget of approximately \$60,000 dollars. *The Blair Witch Project* utilized the “first person” approach, meaning that the cameras in the film represent the audience’s vision, as well as the vision of the character who is recording the action. This technique has also been called the “*diegetic camera*” approach because the camera originates inside the world of the drama. What the audience sees is created, and transmitted, from inside the narrative.

Or as Peter Turner writes in *Found Footage Horror Films: A Cognitive Approach*: “*The spectator’s position is like that of a character immersed in the diegetic events, rather than being in the position of a more traditional invisible observer.*”¹



A shot from the found footage monster movie *Cloverfield* (2008). Here, Rob (Michael Stahl-David) and Beth (Odette Yustman), camera at the ready, prepare for another terrifying encounter.

The Blair Witch Project revolutionized the horror format in many ways, though certainly one can look back to historical antecedents that attempted something similar. These films have titles such as *Punishment Park* (1972), *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) and even *The Last Broadcast* (1998). It is accurate to describe *The Blair Witch Project* as the tipping point movie for the found footage genre, and indeed *The Blair Witch Project* succeeded on numerous fronts that made further found footage horror films desirable as a popular format.

First and foremost, of course, is the budget. One must never forget that film is simultaneously an art form, and a commercial enterprise. Found footage horror movies require no real stars, not much in terms of special effects, and such films can be made using basic equipment. Accordingly, found footage movies can be produced cheaply, and if they are made well, the sky is the limit in terms of the film's profit. That is the economic reason such films exist.

But the creative reasons are much more intriguing. As author Alexandra Heller-Nicholas writes in *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality*, "these films are exciting to watch not because their events may or may not have happened, but from the formal innuendo that they did occur," and from the fact that they often originate "on the same ubiquitous consumer-grade technology that many of us have ourselves (home video cameras, mobile phones, web-cams, etc.)."²

In other words, these stories look real, and are shot with tools that the audience recognizes as ones utilized in everyday reality. The use of this equipment brings the experience of terror closer to home. Found footage horror movies thus fully transport viewers to another life. We are there, in the action. And we are in danger, side-by-side with the protagonists. The "amateur" aesthetic, as it has sometimes been called, supports the idea that the film we are watching is not a self-consciously crafted artistic narrative. Rather, it is footage captured by happenstance, in the middle of the crisis. That last bit—footage created by happenstance, in the middle of the crisis—is key to understanding the popularity of this horror film form in the 2000s.

The 9/11 attacks are found footage horror of an all-too real sort. Cable News networks reported the attack on the World Trade Center in real time, and immediately began filming it, but amateur filmmakers, tourists, for instance, also captured footage of the hijacked planes striking buildings. The 9/11 attacks were a horror show captured *in media res*, and the audience had no idea how it would end.

The amateur aesthetic of the found footage horror film is controversial, for certain. Found footage is far more immersive than any third person filmmaking, and its so-called "amateur" look is widely associated with reality. Awkward framing, dropped cameras, cracked lens and other artifacts of "amateurism" become, in found footage horror films, important techniques utilized to reflect a sense of *cinéma vérité*, or truth. As scholar Xavier Aldana Reyes notes, "*found footage horror is cheap to make and the independent and amateurish look of the product appeals to a number of horror filmmakers. More importantly, the handheld look chimes with the genre's affective drive,*" generating a "video-game style first person immersion."³ Again, the popularity of this form in the 2000s goes hand-in-hand with the rise of horror survival games (*Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill*) and first-person shooters (*House of the Dead*, *Doom*).

The immediacy of the found footage format might be accurately described as a true distillation of the horror film's essence. In generations past, horror films have often featured a Final Girl to root for, for example. She survives the action of rubber reality or slasher films. Since the camera of the found footage type horror film is diegetic, or again, in universe, no survivor is now necessary. There is no need or necessity for an individual to defeat the film's monster or villain, or, even for someone to survive its attack.

The camera is the only necessary survivor, "*a found manuscript that would contain the key to the disappearance of the protagonists,*" according to Reyes.⁴ In the more nihilistic, cynical 2000s horror films of this type, the filmmakers omit the artifice of the hero, or the champion. Instead, no one lives. Only a record of the horrific experiences can be counted on to be continued, a warning passed on to the next generation.

The found footage horror film's veil of artifice is the problem. It is actually very difficult for skilled filmmakers to "echo" an amateur aesthetic, and still create intended effects of suspense, or shock. This is why so many bad found footage horror movies have been made. It is not that found footage movies, by

necessity lack chops, or solid film technique, it is that the filmmakers of this type must carefully, and professionally achieve their horror effects and goals through the mirroring of immersive amateurism

Not all critics are willing to explore this distinction and so, to this day, they attack the found footage format as inherently unprofessional or amateur, not as the artistic, deliberate recreation of the unprofessional or amateurish. The great movie critic Roger Ebert, for instance, in his review of the found footage horror anthology *V/H/S* (2012) was not shy about slamming the format, which had become exhausted. “*In this genre*,” Ebert opined, “*we are given low-quality home video footage, usually underlit, lacking in pacing and intentionally hard to comprehend. The premise is that the footage was taken before some unspeakable event occurred, was discovered later, and now is the film we’re watching.*”⁵

Ebert’s comments on the mainstream critic’s lack of curiosity and comprehension of the found footage films specifically, and the mission of horror films, in general. The horror film wishes to make the audience feel uneasy, and unsafe during a movie-going experience. If all artifice and third-person distancing techniques can be removed from that experience, what is left is something that feels real, and therefore something feels very dangerous. Obviously, not all found-footage horror movies are up to such a challenge, and so do come across as unprofessional. But when this format works, it feels like the mainlining of terror into the audience’s veins.

One might think that after the success of *The Blair Witch Project*, the found footage genre would have immediately proliferated. Such was not the case. After a terrible, early imitator, *The St. Francisville Experiment* (2000), the form fell into obscurity in the early 2000s, likely as a result of the War on Terror and the nation’s trauma at the footage that repeated endlessly on CNN, MSNBC and Fox in the days, weeks and months after that chaotic day in September.

In short, to use 2000s slang or lingo, it was just “too soon” for a found footage movie to succeed. But by the mid–2000s, however, the found footage format was back, more confident, accomplished and nuanced than ever before. It was seen in such films as *REC* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), and *Paranormal Activity* (2009), all of which achieved great popularity and kudos from horror fans, general audiences, and even dismissive critics. Even with these newfound footage films occurring in new settings (such as suburbia or Manhattan), a paradigm for the format soon emerged in the 2000s.

This paradigm, like the slasher paradigm of the 1980s, is one that can be applied to virtually every title in the found footage format.

Found Footage Convention One: The Film Crew

In most found footage horror films, the horror begins when a single, specific act is undertaken: *the decision to make a movie (or often, documentary)*. As fans of *The Blair Witch Project* will recall, Heather set out to make a documentary in the town of Blair with two friends, Mike and Josh. This is the act that puts the team’s life in danger. This act of creation, or artistry, is mirrored in many of the found footage films of the 2000s.

In *Incident at Loch Ness* (2004), Werner Herzog sets out to make a film about the Loch Ness Monster, only to (maybe?) encounter the real thing. In *REC* (2007), a TV news crew is working on a documentary about night-time life in a Barcelona fire station, when the terror is unleashed. In *Diary of the Dead* (2008), the zombie apocalypse begins, and it is observed by filmmakers in the process of creating their own low budget horror movie. In *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006), the rise of a new slasher legend is chronicled by a film crew making a documentary about him.

Because of the presence of a film crew, in all such cases, a horrific scenario is fully documented. Importantly, since a film crew is present, there is always a cameraman or woman on hand. That Director of Photography, that cinematographer, is both a character in the action (who might be killed), and our eyes showing the audience the action.

The fallback, when an actual film crew isn’t available, is also seen frequently in found footage horror movies too. The home video photographer, not part of a crew, is that character. In efforts such as *Cloverfield* (2008), *Paranormal Activity* (2007) or *Evil Things* (2009), a lone person, usually living a “normal” suburban life, uses the camera to record special family events, like holidays, a going away

party, or even just day-to-day events. These individuals are not actively engaged in an official project, but like their corollaries in the film crew, have picked up the camera and appointed themselves as witnesses to something. They have decided, then, to hit “*the record button*.”

The urge in either case is the same: to create something, whether it is a document for public consumption like a documentary about the Loch Ness Monster, or a document for private consumption (such as home movies).

Found Footage Convention Two: Local Legends and Nature as the Fulcrum of Evil/Terror

Often in found footage horror movies, local legends, long held to be untrue, are the source of the terror. In *The St. Francisville Experiment*, a team goes into a local haunted house, the home of Madame De Laurie in New Orleans. She was reputed to be a sadist and murderer who terrorized her slaves in Antebellum days. *Incident at Loch Ness*, of course, involves Nessie, the monster reputed for generations to have lived in the Scottish lake. *Noroi: The Curse* (2005) involves a demon of folklore called Kagutaba.

Not all Found Footage movies concern the discovery of local legends, but many, especially in the 2010s, do so. In that decade, several movies concern Bigfoot (*Willow Creek* [2014], *Exists* [2014]), specifically.

The question of course, is why tie found footage films to old or local “monster” legends? In a substantive way, horror films are about the return of the repressed, of old terrors that people have never outgrown, only attempted to bury. Here, there is a clear tension between the tools of modern-day life, including iPhones, HD cameras, and the like, and the existence of demons, cryptids, witches, and other avatars of old superstition. This juxtaposition suggests the idea of modern man, with his all his technology, becoming powerless in the face of something ancient, or primal, like the Blair Witch, Nessie, or even Bigfoot.

Accordingly, many of the “monsters” of the found footage format dwell in places associated with nature. They dwell in the forests in *Noroi: The Curse*, and *The Blair Witch Project*. A strange encounter with a ghost occurs on the shore of a distant lake, in *Lake Mungo* (2008). These places are locales where modern technology, like the cell phone, doesn’t always work.

They are also places, often, without large populations, or other aspects of human society, like available law enforcement. The core idea of the found footage format is one of taking modern technology to a place where it doesn’t exist or isn’t often used. That destination is a place of nature, and mystery, cloaked in impenetrable nights, and blanketed in trees and forests. In these places, cameras search for things forgotten, or buried in the human psyche: the Old Monsters.

Found Footage Convention Three: The Medium Is the Message

More than in any other horror film format, perhaps, the narratives and the visual techniques of the found footage format are joined together as one. The medium is the message. Thus, a variety of techniques are utilized in this format, all of a visual nature, to tie theme to imagery.

In *Cloverfield*, for example, a video camera records the arrival in Manhattan of a giant monster, and the ensuing destruction. As the camera records the action, the film reveals, at times, what is being taped over to record the footage. There are moments between the monster shows, of characters on dates, talking to one another, even attending an amusement park. These “stolen” moments, in danger of being erased forever, build characterization, but also contrast with the monster attack scenes, showing the humanity lost during this invasion.

These scenes are not traditional flashbacks. These are pre-existing moments that come to the forefront as these tapes are found, as this footage is aired. They are brief grace notes between moments of terror, and they could not exist as they do outside this film format.

Another favorite technique in found footage horror films is what this author calls “Let them Eat Static,” after a line from Khan in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982). Often in found footage horror

efforts when a cut is required between scenes or locations, the camera goes to static momentarily, to bridge the moments. Sometimes it happens during a chase. Sometimes it happens when the camera is turned off, and re-activated. Occasionally, the “let them eat static” moment arrives when a monster attacks, as all Hell breaks loose, and the filmmakers have a little bit of fun with the audience, throwing out static to prevent the audience from seeing clearly the visual details of the assault, or even the assaulter.

Many found footage films also utilize night vision. The night vision filter, which gives individuals an eerie otherworldly glow, also gives them black pools for eyes, making them resemble, at times, demons. The night vision filter has been used in the climactic scene of *REC*, for example, to show audiences what lurks in total darkness in a creepy apartment. That thing in the darkness cannot be seen with human eyes, so again, there is a connection between technology and evil. The monster in *REC* is born from a demonic source, from a possessed girl, but the terror could not have been weaponized without modern technology. So even though the demon in the attack is an ancient evil, it is one that is seen, literally, through the auspices only of technology.

Found Footage Convention Four: Car Ride Exposition

Given the importance of the road trip gone wrong, or road terror type of horror film in the 2000s, it is not surprising that many found footage films also feature scenes of people traveling in cars to their destination (which, as we have seen above, is usually some rural or isolated location). The car driving scene appears in such films as *Noroi: The Curse*, *Diary of the Dead*, and of course, *The Blair Witch Project*.

The car exposition scene usually occurs in the opening minutes of a found footage film, and involves characters discussing their trip, their production (if they are making a movie), and perhaps even local legends. Again, in a third-person film, in a more formally styled film, there would be a long shot, or montage of a car driving to its destination, and then arriving. The found footage format positions this scene inside the car, with the camera, as the landscape rushes by, outside the vehicle. The time is not wasted, because the characters deliver important information about the nature of what they will soon face. The driving scene in found footage movies is always about exposition, sometimes about building character, and, intrinsically, about crossing the threshold from civilization to the primal terror-land.

Found Footage Convention Five: There Are No Survivors

Perhaps the most important modification of the horror film format in the found footage is the outcome for the protagonists. As noted above, there is no necessity for anyone to live in a found footage horror movie. The tapes survive and are discovered. No human being needs testify to the horrific events, since the camera can do it for them. There still may be a final girl in found footage horror movies; a last surviving female of considerable insight and resourcefulness. But now, she may possess all those commendable abilities and attributes, and still die, leaving only the camera to reveal her struggles to the world.

The fact that many found footage movies end with no survivors (*The Blair Witch Project*, *REC*—apparently, *Paranormal Activity*, *Cloverfield*) is perhaps the most consequential addition to horror films’ evolution in more than a hundred years. It is a grim development, for a grim age, certainly, an age of war, recession, natural disasters, pandemics and the like. In addition to contributing to the nihilistic nature of horror films in the 21st century, the “no survivors” paradigm of the 2000s and 2010s suggests a tacit acknowledgment that our technology outlives us.

We may die, but our Facebook accounts go on. Monsters may kill us, but our YouTube videos still get views. Our actions are recorded for posterity, even if we don’t live to see their “viral” spread across the net. It’s a simple fact of 21st-century life. It used to be that people had to write a book to be immortal. Now, their videos represent a storehouse for future generations.

We die. Our footage lives on.

The found footage format blazed through a rapid ascent in the latter half of the 2000s and became the most prolific and dominant format of the 2010s. Film such as *Mr. Jones* (2013), *Devil's Pass* (2014), *As Above, So Below* (2014), *Mr. Jones* (2015), *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (2014), *The Visit* (2015), *Final Prayer* (2015), *The Gallows* (2015) and *Creep* (2015) demonstrate how the new, controversial horror format took on ever complex narratives while continuing to deploy the conventions spelled out above.



Another major genre of horror movies in the 2000s was the J-Horror (Japanese Horror) or Asian Horror remakes. *The Ring* (2002), starring Naomi Watts and Martin Henderson, was a remake of 1998's *Ringu* and

“Spread it like sickness”: J-Horror Remakes (or New Asian Horror)

This category, J-Horror (for Japanese Horror), might be more accurately termed A-Horror, because many films of the 2000s are remakes not just of Japanese films, but Korean ones as well. Uniquely, if one gazes at the J-Horror films, it is clear that globalization has impacted their shape. The Japanese films upon which the J-Horror remakes are based are called “*kaidan*” (meaning ghost story), and they seem to come from a specific film, and a specific tradition in American horror films.

Consider for a moment Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). This film is a mystery about a group of teens, localized in an American suburban neighborhood, who are stalked and murdered by a vengeful ghost, Freddy Krueger. To understand Freddy, why he kills, and why he chooses the teens as victims, the film’s protagonist, Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) must embark on an investigation into the past; one which reveals the crime that her parents (and all the Elm Street parents) committed against Freddy years earlier. Importantly, Freddy’s vengeance is not natural, not of the normal world. He can re-shape reality or dreams to his will, and the film is the most popular and remembered example of what Wes Craven termed the “rubber reality” horror genre.

Consciously or unconsciously, the *kaidan* films mirror the details and concepts of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Films such as *Ringu* (1998) or *Ju-on* (2001) focus on the revenge of an individual who is already dead, and those individuals possess supernatural abilities to reshape the world and terrorize their victims. *Into the Mirror* (2003), the source material for *Mirrors* (2008), and *Chakushin Ari* (2003), the source material for *One Missed Call* (2008), repeat the same format. Importantly, in all such films, there is an investigation by the protagonist which uncovers a crime previously hidden or unknown. The investigation and uncovering of a crime proves key in such J-Horror remakes as *The Eye* (2008), and *Shutter* (2008), as well.

But if rubber reality and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* appear to be part of the DNA gestalt of the “*kaidan*” ghost story films in Japan, the format also added many original facets that came to be of great importance in the American remakes. Most importantly, perhaps, the J-Horror films replaced Freddy’s dream world with a new portal of point of entry into our world: *technology*.

The VHS tape and VCR in *The Ring*, the camera in *Shutter*, and the cell phones in *One Missed Call* and *Pulse* focus on the idea of evil seeping into modern day life through the very devices that we use in regular, daily life. If Tobe Hooper’s *Poltergeist* suggested that TV was a portal through which evil could enter American life, the Japanese horror films of the turn of the century and their American remakes take that conceit much, much further. Colette Balmain, author of *Introduction to the Japanese Horror Film*, writes that in Japanese culture “*concerns around the loss of connection are much more pivotal in a society based upon a long tradition of obligations amongst individuals and communities.*”

Devices like cell phones should connect people to one another, but do they do that?

Or do they distract people from interacting with one another? And the videotape of *The Ring* series? Is it fair to state that the copying and transmission of the tape by different individuals, forges a connection between people in a world missing such connection? Unfortunately, it is an evil connection!

In America, this idea of technology creating an insidious or malevolent connection proved an ideal fit for the War on Terror Age. This is the Web 2.0 age of social media, and 24-hour news cable stations, as well as the dawn of the iPhone, a device that connects people to one another, around the world, via various platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and the like. The “ghosts” in the Japanese horror films and their American remakes transmit their “horror” into the world at large, and that horror outlives them, often, as individuals.

Their suffering, which is what they wish for the “audience” to recognize, multiplies and grows exponentially, among ever-increasing circles. Both *The Ring* and *The Grudge* are obsessed with the mass transmission of individual or personal suffering and horror. The pain of the few gets broadcast to the many, across generations, across locations, across whole landscapes and countries.



Poster art for the sequel to a Japanese remake, *The Ring Two* (2005).

In *The Ring*, Samara uses that “haunted” videotape to broadcast her own personal suffering, to connect with others. She hopes, perhaps, for an empathy she never felt in her life. A viewer watches Samara’s tape and one week later, he or she dies. The only way to prevent an untimely end it is make a copy of Samara’s and pass the terror on, like a haunted chain letter. Only by increasing Samara’s network is the curse alleviated.

Likewise, in *The Grudge*, a house in Tokyo is the nexus of a psychic scar on the world, a wound and hatred so powerful that it infects all who step inside. Nobody who enters the house can escape the “curse” centered there. That scar, that curse—that grudge—wants to connect to the living and form a kind of after-life in the process.

In *Pulse* (2006), dark, angry spirits seep into people through their cell phones, transforming the

living into kind of half-alive shadows of their former selves. This idea seems a commentary on the idea that too much screen time saps the energy, the soul, and instead of fostering connection, only shuts it down. Real connection is not through a screen, or a device, and that kind of contact only opens up the door to ennui, if not possession,

There's a seriousness and darkness to these films, one about old, personal wounds leaking out, or imprinting or impressing themselves on our devices, and in the software and hardware we all utilize in the technological age of the 21st century. The characters in the film may investigate the ghosts, but they rarely escape, or survive their encounters with them. The Japanese horror films of the 2000s, and their American remakes "*in general involve a more fatalistic tone and a more pessimistic approach to an individual's control over their destiny,*" according to Andy Richards, author of *Asian Horror*.⁷ That is an important point to focus on. Once something malicious is free in the ether, whether on TV, or on the Internet, one can't easily put the genie (or Samara) back in the bottle.

This is a crucial shift in American horror films. Already, the found footage horror films of the 2000s have made human survival unnecessary. No lead character need make it through the ordeal, because the camera records the events, and is handed off to us, the audience, to experience the terror for ourselves. The Japanese horror film remakes of the era likewise sever a link between victim action or behavior, and victim consequence. Since the 1980s at least, American horror films have dealt in the precept that "vice precedes slice and dice." In other words, a character's poor behavior, such as pre-marital sex, or recreational drug use results in the character's demise, at the hands of an avenger like Jason Voorhees. But the Japanese remakes offer a new paradigm.

That paradigm is simply, *spectatorship is enough*.

Watching a tape is an act that brings the evil. Listening to a voice mail, makes one a participant in a maleficent calling circle. Walking into a house, unaware of anything about its occupants, drags one into the house's curse. In many J-horror remakes, the victims do literally nothing to deserve their horrible fates other than watch, or listen, or show up. They are accidental tourists, and relatively passive acts, such as spectatorship, bring about their destruction.

Because art does not exist in a vacuum, but rather mirrors real life, one must wonder how this idea came to take a foothold, and carry such power first in Japan, and then, later in the United States. The idea of devices causing connection, but not, perhaps, the right kind of connection, helps to explain Japan's interest in this paradigm. America came to it a little later, after 9/11, and again, that's the key explanation. Some people would suggest, after watching days of 9/11 coverage, and the Iraq Invasion news coverage that CNN, Fox News and MSNBC exist merely to broadcast the suffering of a few to millions, perhaps billions of people.

It isn't true just of war, either. News vans and cameras show up at places like Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora, Sandy Hook, and creates a testament of grief, sorrow, rage, denial and pain. These intense emotions enter through our devices, through TVs, computer laptops, and Internet pages read on a smart phone.

In the early 2000s for example, American audiences saw Saddam Hussein's dead sons on TV as bruised, bullet-ridden corpses. Purple, yellow and brown, these corpses were etched eternally in the nation's memory. Sure, these men were America's enemies. But why broadcast imagery of their dead bodies, across the world, over and over and over again?

One must wonder how the sight of these and other horrors resonate throughout the American psyche, or even the international psych. By revealing atrocities on a routine basis does the media inure the people to the suffering of human beings? We need not commit the atrocities we see on the cable news stations to be held responsible for them.

Seeing is the crime.

Being there is the crime.

Being a passive percipient is the crime.

Again, go back to Samara in *The Ring*. The act of watching is what makes one an accomplice, and the ghost's target. The act of copying the tape is what frees the viewer. Like the slasher film, or found footage horror film, the J-Horror Remakes of the 2000s operate by a particular paradigm or set of

conventions that recur.

J-Horror Convention One: Water and Technology

Water is a medium, like technology, that seems to harbor evil, or allow the transmission of evil. There may be a metaphor worth exploring further here. Water is believed to be conducive to contact with spirits in some cultures. Water spills, pools, leaks, and can suffuse an environment, beginning with a tiny drop. Some might say that it is an adequate corollary for our 21st-century technology. Although Wi-Fi signals are invisible, they permeate the spaces around us, in a way much like water might. Likewise, invisible signals broadcast by TV networks enter our homes, much like running water. In Japan, water is associated in myth with powerful emotions.

The Ring (2002), and *Dark Water* (2005) both involve water “leaking” into the lives of the protagonists. Rachel (Naomi Watts) in *The Ring* (2002), learns how Samara died in a well, drowned. When Samara returns as a ghost, water pours out of the TV sets from which she emerges, again fostering a connection between water and the signals carried by technology.

In *Dark Water*, Dahlia (Jennifer Connelly) becomes involved with the spirit of young girl who died of neglect. She fell into a rooftop water tower and drowned, like Samara. Now, water suffuses Dahlia’s apartment, and she is victim to floods and ubiquitous rain. Although a water tower may not fit the definition of a device, like a cell phone or VCR, it is a product of technology, and modern life. It brings water into our homes for cooking and cleaning. In the ghost’s case, the water, like her tears, falls constantly, staining Dahlia’s life ever further, until she makes a decision to empathize with the child’s tragic experience at the expense of her own life and desires.

The Japanese version of *Pulse*, called *Kairo* (2001), ends with survivors of the ghost attack on a ship at sea, surrounded by water, hopefully protected from technology, this time by the presence of water on all sides.

In all these films, water and technology co-exist, and are perhaps two sides of the same coin. Water is a natural medium, however. Technology is a manmade one.

And in that contrast, the horror lies.

J-Horror Convention Two: The Japanese Floaty Girls

Many of the J-Horror American remakes focus on a female, black-haired ghost, or supernatural force. In Japan this ghost is called an “*onryou*,” and in these films, the appearance of the onryou is strikingly similar: a *girl or woman with black hair*. Black-haired female specters appear in *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, *Dark Water*, *Shutter*, and in *The Eye*, to name just a few titles from this cycle. In the meta/post-modern horror film *Cabin in the Woods* (2012), this convention actually gets a name: The Japanese Floaty Girl. These characters are now, officially, a category in horror film tropes!

The Japanese Water or Floaty Girls are typically, females who were wronged in life, or who suffered terribly in life. Their pain is such that, in the next world, in the spirit world, they return (like Freddy Krueger) to make certain that their anguish has been heard and understood. It is notable that all of these monsters are female, and that many correspond to ideals of beauty and eroticism in Japan. That seems to be the key juxtaposition, beauty and terror in one package. The question might come up about whether this is misogynistic in some sense.

However, one must remember that the Japanese Floaty Girls are not evil by nature, like their spiritual ancestor, Freddy Krueger. Freddy was a child molester and born the “*bastard son of a hundred maniacs*,” meaning he was evil to his core. By pointed contrast, the Japanese Water Girls in some fashion or another have all suffered terrible wrongs or been the victims of terrible crimes. Their campaigns of vengeance result from the wrongs they were handed in life, not an evil nature, or evil upbringing.

The ghost in *Dark Water* suffered neglect and died alone. The family in *The Grudge* was the victim of male domestic abuse. Samara in *The Ring* was never legitimately a part of the family that adopted her and was treated like an outsider. Megumi in *Shutter* (2008) was victimized by a group of men, and

committed suicide following rape. Ana Cristina Martinez in *The Eye* (2008), is not Asian, yet she too fits into this category. She hanged herself after being unable to contend with premonitions that were haunting her, and then she became the haunter, herself.

J-Horror Convention Three: The Investigator, the Procedural, and the Absence of Answers

Many of the J-Horror films involve an investigation by the media, the police or other symbol of authority, into the crimes that gave rise to the Japanese Floaty Girl's reign of terror. In *The Ring*, Rachel works for a metropolitan newspaper, and learns of Samara's story through the urban legend of the video tape that kills the watcher.

In *The Grudge*, Detective Nakagawa attempts to end the curse after three colleagues have succumbed to it. Detective Jack Andrews (Edward Burns) is the investigator in *One Missed Call*. And Ben Carson (Kiefer Sutherland), a suspended police detective, is the investigator in *Mirrors*.

In a typical procedural film, the investigator unravels the mystery. He or she solves it, and whatever crisis exists is resolved because of the investigator's efforts. This is not the case, however, in the J-Horror remakes. Rachel believes she solves Samara's crisis, only to find out Samara will not be sated. All Rachel can settle for is copying Samara's tape and saving the life of her son, Aidan. The horror continues to transmit.

In *The Grudge*, Nakagawa attempts to destroy the house, the hub of the curse, with gasoline. He dies before putting a stop to it.

Likewise, Carson in *Mirrors* seemingly defeats the evil, only to find himself trapped in a mirror universe, at film's end.

And, in *One Missed Call*, the evil is finally defeated, only to be reborn.

In all these cases, the investigator and the investigation fail to yield real results. The Japanese Water Girls and their ilk continue, unabated on their campaigns. Conventional authority cannot stop the psychic cries for help, or vengeance. The authority of this world cannot stop the pain from the Other world. Pain is not easily "sated" by existing structures of law enforcement. Justice therefore becomes, in these films, something *cosmic*, and in a very real sense, outside the hands of human beings.

The J-Horror (or Asian Horror) remakes feature a tremendous unity of characters, ideas and themes, and while that quality is admirable, it may also be the reason why the format burned itself out by the end of the decade. After watching two or three of these efforts, the sameness becomes oppressive. A case for greatness can be made for *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, *Dark Water*, and *Pulse*, in any court of law, but the format quickly becomes repetitive. *The Ring Two* and other sequels, such as *The Grudge 2*, and *The Grudge 3*, failed to grow the trend in a meaningful way, or in a new, evolved direction.

But the death knell for this format occurred in 2008 with a crop of films that utterly failed to spark the imagination of the public: *The Eye*, *Mirrors*, *One Missed Call*, and *Shutter*. Late in the decade, with so much (Japanese) water under the bridge, many of these cinematic tales seemed overtly familiar, or half-baked, and audiences turned their backs on them without regret.



Although #MeToo may have gotten its name in the 2010s (circa 2017), horror movies were ahead of the game. The aughts featured number of films about gaslighting white men in power who betrayed the women in their lives. One such film was *What Lies Beneath* (2000). Top: Claire Spencer (Michelle Pfeiffer) and her husband Norman (Harrison Ford) peer out at the window at suspicious-seeming neighbors. Bottom: director Robert Zemeckis puts Pfeiffer and Ford through their paces.

What Lies Beneath: The “Men Behaving Badly” Films of the 2000s (Or #MeToo)

In autumn of 2017, a social movement for justice called #MeToo swept the United States. This movement was dedicated towards victims, mostly women but also sometimes men, speaking out about the abuse and harassment they had endured in the workplace, and the men in power who had committed the abuse and harassing. The words “*Me Too*” show solidarity for other victims and reveal the breadth and depth of this problem in American society. The choice of words themselves go back to Tarana Burke, an African American activist, who first used them in 2006, more than a decade earlier.⁸

Many of the men who were accused in the 2010s of repeated, terrible, and abusive behaviors were, in fact, ensconced high in the entertainment industry. They have names like Bill Cosby, James Franco,

Matt Lauer, Les Moonves, and Donald Trump. Two individuals accused of this behavior, director Bryan Singer, and power-house Miramax executive producer Harvey Weinstein, have had, over the years, a close association with horror movies.

Going at least as back to the 1940s and cinematic efforts such as *Gaslight* (1944), horror movies and thrillers have taken on the idea of powerful men using their status and privilege to victimize others; again, mostly women. In literature, this idea goes back much further. The gothic format itself has been termed, by author Paula Quigley, “a vocabulary with which to articulate women’s experiences,” including harassment, abuse and rape.⁹

A virtue of good horror movies is they often hold up a mirror to the society that produces them: revealing facets of that society before the culture even reckons with it. The first decade of the 20th century reveals this pro-social function with a sub-genre of films that involve, specifically, men in authority who behave badly towards women, and, in most cases, receiving cosmic justice for their misdeeds.

There are important aspects of this sub-genre to consider. The first is, as noted above, that the abusive men in these films are typically “safe” from human justice by dint of their gender, skin color, societal esteem or profession. Harrison Ford plays a college professor and admired researcher in Robert Zemeckis’s supernatural film, *What Lies Beneath* (2000). His character also happens to be a champion gaslighter of his wife, played by Michelle Pfeiffer. And, as the film reveals, he has also murdered a young student with whom he was having an affair and covered up the crime. He lies to his wife about it, but the ghost of his victim returns, both to punish him, and to “wake” his wife, Claire.

In *Gothika* (2003), Charles Dutton plays a well-regarded psychologist who actually abducts women and tortures them in a sex dungeon. His wife, played by Halle Berry, knows nothing of this secret life until led, essentially by a ghost, to the truth.

In *An American Haunting* (2006), Donald Sutherland plays a man in Colonial America who believes he has been cursed by a witch, a woman, naturally, but there is some cause to believe that he has actually been cursed by his own guilt for the way he has treated her, and for his own inappropriate conduct towards his daughter.

The list goes on and on.

Hard Candy (2005) involves a pedophile who “hides” in plain sight. He is a respectable photographer who masquerades as an ally of women and verbalizes support for good “liberal” causes such as environmentalism. Meanwhile, he invites underage girls—children—back to his home, where he has sex with them.

Both versions of *Shutter*, in 2004 and 2008, also involve a young professional man who is part of the establishment, a photographer as well, who hides a dark secret regarding his treatment of women. He allowed his buddies to rape his ex-girlfriend, and instead of helping her, he recorded the crime.

Deadgirl (2008) finds a group of jocks or athletes abusing a “fuck slave,” a zombie, basically, and making plans to turn one of their female classmates into another one, the next step, perhaps, in the teen culture horror movies popular in the 1990s (*The Rage: Carrie 2*, *Stir of Echoes*, etc.)

Even the admittedly exploitive *Sick Nurses* (2008) contends with the bad behavior by men in authority. In this case, that man is an esteemed physician who is the “doctor of the year,” manipulating women to hurt other women.

The most fascinating aspect of this dozen or so “Men Behaving Badly” horror films is the mechanism for revenge against these men. There is an unconscious awareness, perhaps, in these films that legal authorities—again, often controlled by white men—will not address, correct or prosecute these very real, very harmful acts.

Accordingly, the supernatural must step in.

The supernatural mechanism doesn’t obey or adhere to human authority, or systemic rules of entitlement and privilege. The ghosts of the women wronged in *What Lies Beneath*, *Gothika*, *Shutter*, and *Sick Nurses* are the ones who cry out for justice, mete justice, and make the men pay for their behavior. Importantly, however, these women are already “dead.” They were wronged in life but got no satisfaction in life. Their only avenue for justice is to reach out from beyond the grave, after they have

been destroyed, to call out and punish their abusers.

This is actually a perfect metaphor for the #MeToo movement, because the victimized women (and again, some victimized men) often lose jobs, or even entire careers over the abuse they suffered. They suffer mental and physical trauma because of the unwanted harassment and abuse. They become “ghosts,” after a fashion, in their own lives, in this mortal coil. Their only way to fight back in a system that perpetually fails to hear them is to call out their abusers, now on social media, or often in lawsuits. But in a very real sense, the abusers made them ghosts, people who have not been heard or acknowledged; people who cannot continue their life or career because of a conspiracy of silence, or because they have been deemed “difficult” for not playing the game according to the rules established by powerful and untrustworthy men in the entertainment industry, for example.

In films like *An American Haunting*, the victims of male privilege have no recourse but to “haunt” those who have wronged them, in a kind of vengeful afterlife. But the inference is plain. The women are wronged, don’t get heard, or don’t receive justice in the mortal coil. If they want their voice listened to, or justice to be meted, the result may be a kind of cursed half-life, one that still doesn’t give them success, peace of mind, or even closure, in this world.

Not all films of this decade were as socially conscious, of course. An absolutely dreadful interloper film, *Swimfan* (2002), for example, concerns an entitled, white teenage athlete, a swimmer, who cheats on his girlfriend and has sex with another young woman. Instead of asking the audience to consider the idea that this young man should face the consequence of his actions, the film is structured to build sympathy for the male athlete, since he could lose his academic future over his misdeeds. The interloper he contends with, a young woman, is a psycho and dangerous. Blame and responsibility are landed on her shoulders, instead of the young man’s.

It’s a perfect case of Brock-Turner-ism.

It is fascinating that so many of these “men behaving badly” films were produced between 2000 and 2009, mostly by mainstream Hollywood where this problem of abuse is so ubiquitous. This is evidence, perhaps, that horror, even in a time of big budgets, and A list “stars,” respond to what’s in the water, culturally-speaking, before many of us are aware of what lurks there, beneath the surface. The culture’s awakening to “Men Behaving Badly” arrived, formally, in 2017, with the viral campaign of #MeToo, yet the horror film genre had been making this case as plain as day, more than a decade earlier, revealing “*what lies beneath*,” to co-opt a term.

“To Me, Hollywood Is About Death”: The Neo Slashers

It is no exaggeration to state that Wes Craven and Kevin Williamson’s *Scream* (1996) saved the horror film format in the mid-1990s. The success of that film created a miniboom of new, self-aware, or “meta” slasher films like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1998), and *Urban Legends* (1998). The glory of this format is two-fold.

First, the neo-slashers resurrect the Slasher Paradigm of the 1980s, evoking nostalgia in the audience. Secondly, however, these slasher films feature movie-savvy, irony-coated characters who comment on aspects of that paradigm. The neo slashers are entertaining, fast-moving, smart movies that are self-reflexive, and summon the memory of a previous decade.

As the 2000s began, the neo slashers were still going strong. *Scream 3* (2000), *Cherry Falls* (2000) and *Urban Legends: Final Cut* (2000) all premiered at the start of the decade, and attempted to extend the format’s winning streak, again juxtaposing the slasher paradigm with self-aware, sharp-witted protagonists (and screen-writers).

But, as is the case with all movie fads, or trends, the neo slashers began to tire out. *Scream 3* is no disaster, but suffers from a case of familiarity, and a return to the well too many times in four short years. Another neo-slasher film that should have been good, *Valentine* (2001), failed too because it seemed like nothing new, or particularly interesting.

Then, of course, came the 9/11 terror attacks on NYC and VA. Almost immediately, several

pundits, including the editor of *Vanity Fair*, Graydon Carter, and *Time Magazine* columnist Roger Rosenblatt, declared what they believed was the end “*of the age of irony.*”

After the terrorist attacks which killed more than three thousand Americans, everything felt so bloody real. A nation that had experienced peace and prosperity for a long epoch was suddenly forced to contend with tragedy on a scale not seen since the Vietnam War.

In this brave new world, sassy teenagers reciting and overcoming movie clichés while fighting a costumed Ghost Face, felt, perhaps, off the mark. The neo slasher format was perfect for a time of partying, economic expansion and the rise of the Internet, which fostered connections among movie fans, but woefully inadequate to address the bad times following several terrorist attacks, including not just 9/11, but the forgotten Anthrax attacks, and the Beltway sniper attacks. Americans felt under siege during this time, and there were plenty of terrible things to be afraid of.

The neo slashers, as a result, largely went away.

This notation is not meant to suggest that all slasher films disappeared, only that the neo format—the juxtaposition of humor and scares—largely did so. Remakes of *April Fool's Day* (2008), *Prom Night* (2008), *My Bloody Valentine* (2009) and *Friday the 13th* (2009) all suggested that the slasher format still had life left in it, but for the most part these remakes were played straight, without the self-awareness or “irony” that *Scream* and its 1990s brethren had popularized.

The axiom “bad times make for good horror movies” comes up again, here. The horror form, which had been playing it light and breezy yet cerebral through the *Scream* saga, it turns out, had much bigger fish to fry after 9/11. The horror film woke up to the world around America, and horror began to take on a deeper, darker palette. The first *Urban Legends* film that came after 9/11, for example, reflected the shift in horror movie focus in the 2000s. *Urban Legends: Bloody Mary* (2005) was not a slasher film like its predecessors, rather it was a supernatural ghost story. This shift in genre is an acknowledgment that in the War on Terror Age, the neo-slasher format looked like an artifact from another age,



The serial killer had been the most popular silver screen monster of the 1990s, but by the 2000s it was considered old hat. New slasher films such as *The Cell* (2000) offered a fresh twist on the overused monster. Here, a demonic looking Vincent D'Onofrio menaces Jennifer Lopez in a scene that takes place inside the dreams of a diabolical serial killer.

"Your job is to craft my doom": Serial Killer Cinema

The serial killer was the most-oft seen boogeyman of the 1990s. Set in the milieu of the police procedural, serial killer movies featured a realistic monster, and a protagonist to stop him, the investigator. The tools to stop that monster were behavioral science, and in some cases, DNA.

The 1990s serial killer movies were numerous, and repetitive, especially since the leitmotif of so many serial killer films were the under-the-surface connections between cop and monster. The most popular and remembered serial killer of the 1990s was Hannibal Lecter, a character who returned in

three films in the aughts. The first, *Hannibal* (2001), was Ridley Scott's operatic sequel to *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), while the next two installments, *Red Dragon* (2002) and *Hannibal Rising* (2007), were prequels.

With so many serial killers having stalked the Clinton Era, the 2000s films went to great lengths to distinguish themselves, to revamp the form in new ways. The aforementioned *Hannibal* eschewed the police procedural, for the most part, and instead involved not Clarice hunting down Hannibal (Anthony Hopkins), but Hannibal "protecting" Clarice from corruption in the FBI. The film became notorious for a scene in which Hannibal fed an agent's (Ray Liotta) own, cooked brain to him.

Another film, *The Cell* (2000), introduced fantasy elements into the serial killer cinema. In this film directed by Tarsem Singh, a psychologist played by Jennifer Lopez could travel into the nightmare universe of a serial killer's mind using a new technology. That dreamscape was an imaginative, terrifying one, dominated by bizarre and memorable imagery. The serial killer, played by Vincent D'Onofrio, fancied himself a God/demon like creature, and trapped the counselor in his own Alice in Wonderland-like world. In this world, the killer's exaggerated sense of his own power was visualized, as was his misogyny.

The *Saw* movies, while also qualifying as torture-porn, represent another innovative form of serial killer film. In the six *Saw* films featured during this decade, the serial killer didn't actually do the killing. Instead, the Jigsaw Murderer simply set traps, and the victims would, for all intents and purposes, kill—or save—themselves. The police procedural format was left intact, but the *Saw* movies reshaped the genre to focus not on hunting the killer, but byzantine traps and "games" of monstrous dimensions. These games had names like "the reverse bear trap" and "the venus flytrap."

American Psycho (2000), meanwhile, corkscrewed the format again by making the serial killer the film's protagonist. And, to further complicate matters, Patrick Bateman's (Christian Bale) murder spree might have been all in his deranged head, a product of the dog-eat-dog world of Wall Street in the 1980s.

Other serial killer efforts in the decade include the dead-on-arrival *The Watcher* (2000), which starred Keanu Reeves as a very low-energy serial killer, and *The Alphabet Killer* (2008), which focused on the investigator (Eliza Dushku), and her mental collapse from ongoing attempts to catch an elusive murderer.



Views of a remake: *Thir13en Ghosts* (2001), based on William Castle's 1960 opus *13 Ghosts*. Top: Rafkin (Matthew Lillard) sees dead people, thanks to his special ghost-vision glasses. Bottom: Kathy (Shannon

“You can’t go home”: Remakes

The remake or reboot was one of the most commonly-seen movie formats of the 2000s. J-Horror is different, at least in for terms of classification in this book. J-Horror films are remakes of contemporary Japanese horror films. But remakes of classic American horror films, ones sometimes many decades old, were an even bigger trend the first decade of the 21st century. Author Christian Knoppler provides a good definition of the term “remake,” and one that is useful to an understanding of them:

The term does not mark a genre of films defined by common themes or formal factors, but more accurately describes a practice of reproduction. A remake, in short, is a new version of an existing film, a repeat production. Upon closer investigation though, the boundaries of what constitutes a “new version” becomes blurred, and the remake may overlap with other reproductive films like the adaption, or the sequel. Depending on one’s concept of intertextuality, of course, all texts reproduce earlier texts, and the remake only stands out in its declared focus on a single source.¹⁰

The remakes in the 2000s aren’t merely remakes then, but also prequels, for example, such as *The Exorcist: The Beginning* (2005), or *Red Dragon* (2002). These films recreate the atmosphere and structure of earlier, classic films, yet convey a narrative earlier “in universe” than the stories audiences have long been familiar with.

With this definition in mind, one must consider the robust remake catalog in the post 9/11 era. In the ten-year span between 2000 and 2009, more than twenty remakes of popular American horror films were made, but the trend really began in earnest in 2003 with the success of the remake of Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974).

Often, long-time horror fans argue about which decade is the best, or the most important in American film history. The two competitors for supremacy are the 1970s and the 1980s. The remakes of the 2000s seem to answer that question rather definitively. Fourteen films of the 1970s were remade, including *Willard* (2003), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Dawn of the Dead* (2003), *The Toolbox Murders* (2004), *The Amityville Horror* (2005), *Black Christmas* (2006), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *The Omen 6 6 6* (2006), *When a Stranger Calls* (2006), *The Wicker Man* (2006), *Rob Zombie’s Halloween* (2007), *It’s Alive* (2009), *The Last House on the Last* (2009) and *Long Weekend* (2009).



Selma Blair is DJ Stevie Wayne in the 2005 remake of John Carpenter's *The Fog*.

By comparison, there were a respectable eight horror films from the 1980s remade in the decade. These titles were *The Fog* (2005), *The Hitcher* (2007), *April Fool's Day* (2008), *Day of the Dead* (2008), *Prom Night* (2008), *Friday the 13th* (2009), *My Bloody Valentine 3D* (2009), and *Halloween II* (2009).

Other remakes came from 1950s movies (*House of Wax* [2005]), and 1960s productions (*Thirteen Ghosts* [2001]).

Remakes of films from any decade, however, are controversial. Horror movie fans typically don't like to see classic, beloved works re-jiggered by a new generation of filmmakers, in 21st-century Hollywood. Consider the list of remakes from the 1970s. These titles are "re-imaginings" of classic efforts from John Carpenter, Wes Craven, and Tobe Hooper, the maestros, made by talents who don't typically boast the same acclaim, or affection. In fact, many directors of remakes are first-time feature directors.

Similarly, Hollywood in the 2000s is not necessarily the place for sub-text and deeper meaning. Indeed, such material is actually frowned upon. Because movies of this span must achieve success on their opening weekends, this fact often results in the remakes watering down or omitting key aspects of the original.

Case in point: the remake *The Last House on the Left* does not include the scene from the original Craven film of a suburban Mom and wife biting off an assailant's penis.

Ask any horror fan about that.

As gruesome as the moment is in the 1972 original, it is a trademark of the film's sex-based brutality. To lose it is to suggest that the remake is somehow "less than" the original in terms of boldness; in terms of shock and awe.

Remakes are controversial for reasons beyond the frequent lack of subtext and the absence of the maestros. Typically, the remakes of this era (again, consider prequels to fall under this rubric as well), add much psychological motivation and "reasons" for the horror. For example, Rob Zombie's *Halloween* retcons Michael Myers as the disturbed outgrowth of a childhood spent in an abusive, white trash, over-sexualized home. It is not necessarily that this idea is invalid, or wrong. It is up to every filmmaker to tell the best story that they can, after all. Rather, the "child abuse" narrative of Zombie's *Halloween* means that Michael loses the "Shape" quality of his character. He is no longer an implacable boogeyman that becomes the receptacle for various and sundry audience fears. Now he is the avatar of a very specific and recognizable background: the cycle of abuse.



Rob Zombie rebooted John Carpenter's *Halloween* in 2007. Here, Michael Myers (Tyler Mane) strangles Lynda (Kristina Kleb).

This retcon makes Michael's terror familiar, instead of ambiguous. This author believes (controversially) that the *Zombie Halloween* films are worthwhile, and indeed, genius in some very powerful ways. But they are, also, far afield of what Carpenter wrought, and over-explanatory in terms of Michael's background.

Often, it is necessary to point out to those who deride remakes out-of-hand that it was actually the well-established and aging horror franchises that created the necessity for them. The *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween* series had witnessed years of inferior sequels or continuations. As author James Kendrick writes in his essay "*The Terrible, Horrible Desire to Know: Post 9/11 Horror Remakes, Reboots, Sequels and Prequels*": "*the commercial logic behind the creation was predicated largely on the fact that the original series had exhausted themselves through seeds of diminishing critical and commercial impact, hence the need to 'begin anew.'*"¹¹

Indeed, when one looks at a deeply flawed franchise sequel such as *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002), it becomes very difficult to argue that Rob Zombie's creative, non-conventional remake is somehow an inferior product or a betrayal. It is different than what had come before, true, but also, importantly, revitalized. When one considers other deeply inferior sequels such as *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* (1993), or *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991), the advantages of remakes and a "fresh start" become more apparent.

Audiences wanted more of the neo classic monsters such as Michael, Freddy or Jason, but simply weren't getting their money's worth out of the hit-or-miss, shaggy dog sequels, some of which were in their fourth decade at this time. How many times can Michael Myers "come home" to Haddonfield without rethinking his campaigns, or even, simply, the nature of the home he returns to?

Love or hate Rob Zombie's approach to the classic material, he at least gave serious, intriguing thought to such questions.

Similarly, one can't intellectually disparage remakes simply because they repeat old formats and narratives. Those are not grounds for a solid argument. Is the 1978 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* to be dismissed, simply because it repeats the characters and ideas of the 1956 original? In short, repetition of beloved narrations and themes have long been a galvanizing and credible reason for the existence of art. As Scott A. Lukas and John Marmysz write in their text *Horror, Science Fiction, and Fantasy Films Remade*:

"...all film, like ritual, plays on the value of repetition, either to make dramatic points or to create suspense in the audience. Film remakes heighten repetition by moving from mere illusion and brief action to credited or uncredited remaking of the entire filmic text. This remaking of film allows for not only an affirmation of control and mastery ... but the forging of cultural familiarity with society itself. When people repeatedly experience the same stories, albeit in new ways and with new actors and new technology, a psychological connection to a new shared world is formalized."¹²

According to these authors, remakes "*institutionalize familiarity*," and play on feelings of nostalgia for beloved works of art. The tension occurs, however, because the feelings of nostalgia evoked by films like *Halloween*, the original *Friday the 13th* and the like, are not ones that fans want messed with. The quest to "activate" nostalgia is a difficult one, because so much is involved. Nostalgia for a movie such as *Halloween* is about more than the film; it's about the context that shaped the film. And we don't live in that context anymore. We live in a different world, and the appeal to nostalgia actually heightens, in some way, the differences between the past and the present.

The remake came about for very specific reasons, given the context of the 2000s. Specifically, the horror film was once again at a crossroads. The 1990s saw the rise of *The X-Files* (1993–2002), which served up the equivalent of mini-horror movies every week. Old formats, such as rubber reality seemed to be dying out. A glut of serial killer horror movies flattened the genre, and made it seem old, and worn out. How many times could audiences sit through a police procedural about a serial killer and the cop hunting him, playing a "*deadly game of cat and mouse*." By the year 2000, even the neo-slasher format, which began with *Scream* (1996) in the late nineties was beginning to tire out. As Kevin Heffernan writes in his article "*Risen from the Vault: Recent Horror Film Remakes and the American Film Identity*":

the horror remake cycle ... may be seen as a response to both the waning of the teen slasher film cycle and to the more allusive family-based psychological horrors of *The Sixth Sense*. Far from signaling a mannered or moribund phase of the genre, these horror remakes display tremendous suppleness and ingenuity in their deployment of motifs from both the original movies and contemporary horror films.¹³

So, in theory, horror remakes are lucrative, and represent an attempt to revive the genre. They serve as an homage (or call to nostalgia) for beloved films of years past too, and institutionalize the famous titles, such as *Halloween* or *Friday the 13th* as multi-generational touchstones or myths of America. Yet they are widely hated by horror aficionados. Every announcement of a new horror remake is greeted with complaints and agony. Clearly, there is a disconnect between remakes and their core audience.

Appreciating remakes, as both a critic and a horror fan, requires some mental gymnastics, and that may be the answer to this paradox. If a remake differs in philosophy, approach, and visualization from its source material, the viewer wisely asks, why remake?

If everything about the original is just altered completely, then why remake the original, except to exploit a well-known “brand” name?

And, not coincidentally, the exploitation of a brand name became the key marketing approach to many Hollywood films in the 2000s. One way to make money fast is to offer product with a built-in familiarity. Too much familiarity, however, is not good. The audience that doesn’t want an experience again like *Halloween: Resurrection* nonetheless may be tempted by that call to start “anew” with a remake simply titled *Halloween*.

But remakes are damned if they do, and damned if they don’t.

What if the remake slavishly apes the original film, so much so that, again, the audience asks why remake it? Why remake *Psycho* (1960) shot for shot in 1998? Why remake *Funny Games* the same way? Again, this approach suggests to fans and critics that the decision to remake is purely commercial. Take an old script, reshoot it with more money and more famous actors, and a minimum of creativity or artistry is required.

This is the remake syndrome.

A remake can’t be too different from its source material. And it can’t be too similar to its source material. What middle ground does that leave for remakes, in which to succeed? How is that needle to be thread?

Based on the remakes that are highly regarded from the 2000s, the answer is simple, and it goes back to historical context. Most of the films remade in this decade came from the 1970s, as noted above. Those films were not just horror efforts, but brilliantly conceived social commentaries on consumerism (*Dawn of the Dead*), violence in American society (*The Last House on the Left*), the battle between the haves and the have nots (*The Hills Have Eyes*), reproductive rights (*It’s Alive*), and comparative religion (*The Wicker Man*). All those seventies films are about something more than scaring audiences. They scare audiences because they intelligently and artistically reflect the issues roiling their cultures at the time of the disco decade.

The successful remakes of the 2000s take the “bones” of their source material but find 21st-century contexts that can fit those narratives. The 2006 version of *The Hills Have Eyes* is still about the haves and have nots, but it is also about the raging battle during the War on Terror Age, between Blue State Americans and Red State Americans. It’s not just the monsters (standing in for the terrorists, perhaps) who threaten survival, but the division among the “family” (representing American political affiliations). Similarly, the cannibals in this version of *The Hills Have Eyes* are victims of the American government’s policies, and their revenge is blowback against their policies, again reflecting Al Qaeda and the War on Terror. A new, 21st-century social commentary has been layered onto the original film’s frame or skeleton, and it works surprisingly well.

The same is true for other remakes in this era. Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* features roughly the same narrative structure as Carpenter’s original but spins it in a new direction that reveals a 21st-century understanding of child abuse, and, perhaps more trenchantly, the cycle of violence. It is true, this Michael Myers is not the abstract “Shape.” Instead, he is a boy who is abused in his poverty-stricken home, confused by the culture’s over-sexualization of his mother, and who, after committing a crime, is

cast into a heartless, cold system of incarceration that doesn't help, but actually makes him more anti-social.

Again, this is not your father or mother's *Halloween*, for certain. However, Zombie has not replaced something (the Boogeyman idea) with nothing. Instead, he has injected the series with new life, and new context that resonates in the 21st century.



Old monsters got remade, re-imagined and rebooted for the 21st century. Jason Voorhees (Kane Hodder) got an upgrade to cyborg in *Jason X* (2002), a *Friday the 13th* movie set in outer space.

The truly bad remakes of the 2000s, this author proposes, are those that re-do old films consisting of social commentary about their era, with, simply, nothing. This is how remakes fail. They superficially tell the same story as the original, but without all the cerebral intelligence behind the original. These

films are truly like Cliff-Notes versions of the source. The 2005 remake of the original *The Amityville Horror* (1979) fails to replace the original film's subtext about home ownership with anything of comparative value or interest and feels empty and superficial by comparison. The 2005 remake of *The Fog* eschews the social commentary about greed and avarice at the start of the Reagan Era with no social commentary whatsoever, and thus feels like a shell of a movie. The 2007 *The Hitcher* does a gender swap in terms of protagonist, and loses the original's, sub-textual homoeroticism. Again, the remake can't help but feel like a very surface, unsophisticated text by comparison.

When remakes fail in the 2000s, this is the reason why.

Updated special effects, filming techniques, and new actors can't substitute for creative thought, or artistic connection to the material. The old versions of these films are rollercoasters, experiential stories, but ones that leave the audience thinking about how the films relate to their lives, their culture, and their world. The remakes are, by comparison, mere rollercoasters. Here, the obvious issue is that one should not remake a film if the result is a new text that carries less psychic heft, and less relevance to people beyond its simple narrative.

Navigating the Remake Syndrome is not easy. But, on the other hand, it is sad that so many horror fans write off films at the mere word "remake." The way to approach these efforts is to take each on a case by case basis. And asking, of each film: *does it speak to its time as clearly, artistically and relevantly as the original spoke to its time?*

If the answer is affirmative, the remake is probably winner.

If the answer is negative, you may be watching a shallow cash-grab.

But a one-size fits all approach to navigating remakes doesn't make any sense, and doesn't illuminate the films as works of art.



In the road trip gone wrong remake, *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), Brenda Carter (Emilie de Ravin) goes on the attack.

Going My Way? The Road Trip Gone Wrong Horror Film

One of the most common horror sub-genres of the 2000s is the so-called “road trip gone wrong,” or the road trip gone awry. In narratives of this type, unwitting travelers—usually an uneven numbered group of young people (three or five)—take a detour into terror that they could never have predicted encountering at the start of the day.

To be clear, these films are not unique or new to the aughts.

Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1973) and Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) are two of the most notable examples of the format, and classics at that. The format was revived—and examples of it multiplied in the aughts—because of one galvanizing event in the decade, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Those attacks are mirrored in the road trip gone wrong format. Americans commuted to work on that normal day, only to take an unexpected detour into unimaginable horror. Their fate was not known to them when they sat down in their cars and traveled to Manhattan, or when they boarded trains to travel to their corporate offices.

The road trip gone awry horror movies concern the sheer unacceptability of a day that goes badly; how the detour perverts and overturns expectations and changes everything. It reminds the viewer that the world they accept as reality—a world of safety, security, modern technology and moral norms—is not reality at all.

The road trip gone wrong films of the 2000s follow a very specific format. The uneven number of travelers creates an odd-man or woman out, a third wheel, or fifth wheel dynamic. This means that there may be a romantic triangle featured among the protagonists (as in *Wolf Creek* [2005]). That is the obsessive focus of the characters, as they focus on matters ultimately unimportant in the face of their soon-to-be-threatened mortality.

The characters on a trip then, almost universally, make a final stop on their journey at a borderland between civilization and terror; the last wrong turn or stop before the trespass into the savage world or savage universe. In the majority of road trip horror films, that place, that crossroads, is “The Last Chance Gas Station.” It is the final outpost of humanity and modern civilization before the descent into savagery. Often, the Last Chance Gas Station is manned or populated by denizens of the underworld, the horror world. They guard the borderlands. The Last Chance Gas Station is an important stop in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Wrong Turn* (2003), *Dead End* (2004), *Wolf Creek* (2005), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *Vacancy* (2007), and other examples of the format.

Once the travelers have crossed the borderland and Last Chance Gas Station into the realm of terror, the “commuters” of the road trip gone wrong encounter a new realm where, for the most part, cell phones don't function. A key element of this narrative type is the theme that modern technology cannot help the protagonists survive or escape, just as modern technology did not help the victims of the 9/11 attacks. The safety and security provided by civilization, by technology, is an illusion in such stories, one that is shattered.

In fact, once positioned in the dark world, the protagonists often stumble upon an archaeological repository, artifacts of previous survivors and of the civilized world. All these previous victims leave behind is their technology: ruined cars, stolen cell phones, and even video cameras that have been stolen by their assailants. This is the “Lost and Found” or belongings room, where the savage inhabitants of this world cast-off the useless and valueless trappings of modern society. If a road-trip gone awry film is set during the 1970s in these aughts films or remakes, older items of the civilized society, such as plastic drivers' licenses, may be found in the Belongings or Lost and Found Rooms.

This trope, the Lost and Found Room, occurs in such films as *Wrong Turn* (2003), *House of Wax* (2005) and *Wolf Creek* (2005), to name just a few.

Another aspect of the post-9/11 milieu involves the assailants themselves, the inhabitants of the dark mirror world, in the place the travelers have crossed over to. An aspect of xenophobia crept into American culture during this time, a pronounced fear of the “Other,” like Muslims, during the War on Terror. Accordingly, the boogeymen of “road trip gone wrong” horror movies often inhabit foreign lands (*Hostel*, *Hostel 2*), or geographically isolated regions (a desert in the *Hills Have Eyes*, rural Texas in

Chainsaw, the Australian Outback in *Wolf Creek*), and often operate in tribes, families, or “cells.” A savage family controls a town in the remake of *Chainsaw*. Deformed mutants zealously guard their bombed out 1950s town in the remake of *Hills*. Sometimes the uncivilized and dangerous region is a representation of economic collapse. In *House of Wax* (2005), travelers stumble quaint American small town that time—and the American economy—forgot.



Space Horror films like *Alien* (1979) and *Event Horizon* (1997) continued to be made in the 2000s. *Pitch Black* featured a spaceship crew marooned on a planet of flying carnivores. Top: Cole Hauser as Johns. Bottom: film director David Twohy.

Space Horror

Outer space is the final frontier, and the horrific frontier, according to genre movies in the first decade of the 21st century. Although a great horror movie in this format, *Event Horizon* (1997), had bombed with audiences the previous decade, the sub-genre that gave the world films such as *Alien*

(1979), *John Carpenter's The Thing* (1982) and *Aliens* (1986) came back strong in the 2000s.

John Carpenter has stated many times that there are two types of horror narratives. One involves the horror outside our tribe that attacks our tribe. The other type of horror occurs when the horror or monster strikes from within our tribe. In this latter form, the monster is us; it comes from within.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks provided both types of horror for the genre to mull over, and chew on. The terrorists were foreign-born nationals, of course, but they were “sleepers” secretly operating without interference in our country, in America. The terror was from both the inside, and the outside. Horror films featuring outer space, or aliens in space or on Earth, tread that same ground easily.

They could be from another planet, but also ... gestating inside of us.

Accordingly, the aughts provided movies set on other worlds with extra-planetary threats like *Pitch Black* (2000), but also stories of alien invasion or incursion here on Earth, in efforts such as *AVP* (2004), *AVP: Requiem* (2007), and a new version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, this time titled simply, *Invasion* (2007).

John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars (2001) was released almost immediately before the 9/11 attacks, in late August of that year, and met with absolutely savage reviews, the worst in Carpenter's career since *The Thing* in '82. Yet in the years since *Ghosts of Mars* release, many critics have seen it as involving the very concepts that would dominate the decade's “War on Terror” era space films.

Writing in *Literature/Film Quarterly* in 2002, scholar Tom Whalen called *Ghosts of Mars* “the most timely, if not prescient Hollywood film of Summer 2001,” and noted that the film is “about one thing: dominion.”¹⁴

Eerily, the film features undetectable Martian ghosts, spirits who—very much like sleeper cell terrorists of Al Qaeda—can move about undetected in human form. They take over the bodies of your friends, your compatriots, or the soldiers who are supposed to protect you; and they can't be detected at first. They exist both outside the tribe, and now, inside the tribe, to hark back to Carpenter's discussion of the genre's types.

More importantly, *Ghosts of Mars* is indeed about blowback and “dominion,” the idea that decades of American interference in the foreign affairs of other nations, like, for example, the installation of the Shah of Iran by Americans in 1953's Operation Ajax, “would be met, finally, with rebellion and terror.” The film's Martian warriors wake up from a long slumber to find humans mining their planet, settling their planet, perhaps even “occupying” it, and fight to reclaim it. Many historians and diplomats see the 9/11 terror attacks as similar blowback, an asymmetrical attack meant to protest America's involvement in Middle East affairs, in countries such as Iran, Iraq, and most importantly, Saudi Arabia.

The differential in Martian and human fighting styles even seems to hark back to 21st-century American politics. The Martians use cutting weapons and blades (like the box cutters of the 9/11 hijackers). The humans, meanwhile, use high tech weapons, and mirroring America's superiority over Iran and Iraq, even nuclear weapons, which are deployed to put down the insurrection. It is downright strange how a film that was created before 9/11 so eerily echoed the context of that tragedy. As Whalen points out, the Martians who “inhabit the humans ... form training camps where they chant and exercise in rhythm” and like the terrorists on the planes that were hijacked, “all their weapons are handmade, they don't use guns.”¹⁵

Carpenter is the talent who made comment about the AIDS plague even before it was in full swing (*John Carpenter's The Thing*), and who took on Reaganism in the 1980s (*They Live*), so it may be no surprise that his 2001 film gazed at America's history of interference in the affairs of other nations (especially those with Oil Reserves) ahead of 9/11 and crafted a film that would take on the concepts of dominion and blowback.

And, of course, he could have been reading the tea leaves. In October of 2000, for instance, Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda attacked the U.S.S. *Cole* in a terrorist bombing. Like so many artists, Carpenter was able to create something that looked back, to a siege story like the one seen in *Zulu* (1964), and connected it meaningfully to our present, in a story about the future.

AVP (Alien vs. Predator) has also been viewed, frequently, through the lens of the 9/11 terrorist

attacks. In the film, the final woman, Alexa, teams up with a predator, Scar, to defeat the savage, animalistic xenomorphs of the Alien saga. Scholars have viewed this alliance as a kind of “*Coalition of the Willing*,” between unlike people to defeat a threat outside the symmetrical nature of State vs. State warfare. Both humanity and the Predators hail from technological states with hierarchies of order and control. They possess different ideologies and goals, and no doubt vastly different governing forms. Yet they join forces to stop an asymmetrical threat, the fast-breeding Aliens, which—because they gestate in secret inside biological hosts—again can be substitutes for Al Qaeda’s hidden sleeper cell agents. As author Zelma Catalan notes in “*Aliens, Predators and Global Issues: The evolution of a Narrative Formula*,” this Coalition of the Willing may intentionally look familiar:

So, left entirely on her own, Alexa has no choice but to resort to an alliance with the predator. “The enemy of my enemy is my ally,” she says, and teams up with the technological savage who alone can overpower the biological perfection of the alien. The contingency of her tactical move reverberates with echoes from political decisions made by the West through the 1980s and 1990s. Its rationale emerges from the awareness that evil has the power to transcend borders and should be contained by collective, rather than individual effort. There is in this a strand the optimism characteristic of the post–2001 years when the hope that international threats such as Al Qaeda, or the drug cartels in Latin America, could be quashed, if not eliminated, provided there was concerted international effort. But what the film ultimately shows through its narrative is that the victory achieved in this way is only provisional. For the dangerous Other to civilization has yet another quality not envisaged by its humanistically-minded opponents—it can produce hybrids not only with its superior humans but also with its own enemy.¹⁶

The Invasion (2007) went a different way, suggesting that the War on Terror is a result, finally, of humanity’s irrationality and impulsive nature. In all previous filmed versions of this material, in 1956, 1978, and in 1990, the thing that makes the “Pod People” or alien invaders so hideous is the fact that they removed emotion—and love—from humanity’s blueprint. If they won the planet, they would eliminate love. The 2007 version notes that the aliens will bring peace to a world on fire. Throughout the film, reference is made to the Iraq Occupation, tensions with North Korea, and even Hurricane Katrina. When the aliens gain the upper hand, all such conflicts stop. World peace is achieved. The humans strike back, take back the planet ... and the conflicts begin again. This is perhaps the most caustic of all *Body Snatchers* films, in part because it also notes that prescription drug usage in the 2000s has already turned us into the equivalent of numb, emotionally flat “Pod People.” Furthermore, the film suggests that we would rather go on killing and murdering each other than live in a world of rationality and stability.

If love comes hand-in-hand with hate, is it worth preserving?

Doom (2005) was a military alien movie in the mode of *Aliens* (1986), though much less well-done. It involves a team of soldiers contending with the spill-over from a Lovecraftian space gate. Basically, the aliens invade a human installation on Mars, and our soldiers must adopt the War on Terror premise of President George W. Bush, who insisted that the purpose of the Iraq War was defense of the homeland. “*We are fighting them over there, so we don’t have to fight them here, in the United States of America*,” he declared in a speech on August 28, 2007.

Pandorum (2009) is another space horror of the decade, and it involves crew members of a generational spaceship far from Earth, awaking to find that something has gone terribly wrong. Their spaceship was now overrun with the cannibalistic, savage ancestors of the sleepers on the ship. In this case, the relation to the 2000s is a bit more abstract, but again not too difficult to detect. In the 2000s, America became engaged in an unpopular war had suffered a brutal surprise attack. A space shuttle had been destroyed in an accident. A Bush was once more in the White House, and the rich were getting richer while the poor and middle class were losing ground. In short, America—which had fought for Civil Rights in the 1960s and had landed a man on the moon in 1969—seemed to be devolving; to be repeating earlier mistakes.

Pandorum represents this future of an atavistic past taking hold. Author Katarzyna Pisarska’s *Darwin’s Monsters: Evolution, Science and the Gothic in Alvar’s Pandorum* elaborates on this notion:

...the beastly hominids of *Pandorum*, who supplant humans at the top of the food chain, are both our heirs in the evolutionary scheme and our returned ancestors from out of mind.... As the barbarous past materializes on Elysium, the spaceship becomes a Gothic space where humankind lapses into monstrosity.¹⁷

Another beloved space horror film of the decade is *Pitch Black* (2000), which meditates on a very 2000s concept, that evil, in the form of convict Richard B. Riddick (Vin Diesel) is required to fight evil, manifested as alien flying dragons. This premise—it takes evil to defeat evil—feels like a guiding principle of the Bush Administration in the War on Terror as it authorized torture, indefinite incarceration, and pre-emptive warfare as the key tools to fight an aggressive War on Terror. The Administration's answer to the Vietnam War quandary was not the consensus lesson most Americans had learned from that quagmire, that it wasn't a war that ever should have been fought in the first place. Rather, the Administration seemed to believe that if it only used the most brutal, un-American tactics possible, it would emerge victorious in the conflict. The thesis proved faulty, in the end. American forces have now fought in Afghanistan and Iraq longer than American forces served in Europe or the Pacific in World War II. And this time, America's ideals were sacrificed to boot.

One of the weirdest and most fun space horrors of the decade was *Jason X* (2001), which sees *Friday the 13th*'s Jason Voorhees awakened from cryogenic sleep in the distant future, a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994)–style world of holodecks and fully functional androids. Once Jason is awake in this brave new world, he resumes his murderous activities with glee, and is even rebuilt as a kind of “Borg” Jason thanks to some helpful medical nanites. The film is tongue-in-cheek, and self-reflexive but was not met with much popularity or acclaim.

Other space horrors of the decade include Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* (2007) about a mission to restart Earth's sun, and the presence of a mad terrorist, a zealot, imperiling that mission, again a reflection of the religious nature of the 9/11 attacks. And *Supernova* (2000) is a weird kind of *Dead Calm* (2000) in space, with a dangerous psychopath possessing what might be interpreted as a weapon of mass destruction, the ostensible reason for prosecuting the War against Iraq. In *Supernova*'s weird final twist, the weapon of mass destruction is launched, and sent on its way towards Earth, an attack on the motherland that is never resolved.



Torture Porn Boogeyman: The Jigsaw Murderer (Tobin Bell)—a diabolical puppet master—headlined six *Saw* installments from 2004 to 2009.

They transcend themselves. They are transfigured”: Torture Porn

Although the so-called “Savage Cinema”—horror films of unusual and graphic brutality—goes back at least as far as the late 1960s (*Night of the Living Dead* [1968]) and reached a zenith, perhaps, in the 1970s with titles such as Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *Deliverance* (1972), the 2000s witnessed the birth of a new movement in graphic horror filmmaking that was met by mainstream society with widespread dislike and dismay.

At first, this trend was termed “gorno,” a mildly imaginative combination of the words “gore” and “porno.” But then the comparison between horror and porn soon became literal. In 2006, *New York Magazine*’s critic David Edelstein coined the descriptor “*torture porn*.”¹⁸ As one can see, this descriptor actually utilized the word porn, and thus characterized a brand of horror movie as filthy, or obscene. Edelstein wrote that he was “*baffled about how far this new stuff goes ... and by why America seems so nuts these days about torture*.”¹⁹ On the positive side, the critic also noted that the “*victims are neither interchangeable nor expendable*,”²⁰ and accurately tagged Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* (2004) as a torture porn film in which Jesus Christ was the victim.

In 2007, in their text *Sexuality and Social Work*, authors Julie Bywater and Rhiannon Jones write that even though victims in torture porn films are both female and male, these films are “*particularly dehumanizing and misogynist*” and part of a wider trend of depicting women as “*highly sexualized prey*”²¹ in the culture. Meanwhile, long-time horror fans, writing on their blogs, also derided these films as lacking aesthetic value and qualities. *City Beat* author TT Stern-Enzi wrote that the films were “*thoughtless fantasies*,” and that “*in most instances this [torture porn] is done with no underlying perspective for critical, social, or cultural discussions of the effect of violence on our collective psyches*.”²² Further, the author also looked outside the United States for the origins of torture porn, fingering Gaspar Noé’s *Irreversible* (2002) as patient zero in the new plague affecting American cinemas.

It is true that outside the United States, the 2000s saw the rise of a new film format in France, the New French Extremity, a movement which is connected, for certain, to torture porn. According to horror scholar and author Alexandra West in her treatise, *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity*, the movement in France (with such adherents as the aforementioned Noé, and Alexandre Aja), “*sees art-house and genre-directors converge to mediate on the most horrific aspects of life and what remains after those social veneers are stripped away. While they do not offer moral lessons, they offer an unsettling catharsis*.”²³ In addition, West noted that these films and filmmakers revealed to an audience that “*a new critical reading can emerge and engage with contemporary culture through a language of violence, pain and cruelty.... Their focus on transformation through violence and sexuality is truly exciting and engaging, allowing an audience to explore the most human of desires through the thin safety net of a screen*.”²⁴

What West’s brilliant exploration of this form reveals is that the New French Extremity, and its cousin, Torture Porn, accomplished is not to be belittled or ignored. These films do reflect vividly on the culture that created them and ask questions of that culture through their application of violence, and through their characters’ endurance in the face of it.

But there is no need to bring the French into a discussion of responsibility for Torture Porn as a format, because torture was one of the key American issues of the War on Terror Age. One of the most popular TV series of that era is *24* (2001–2008), a series that follows a counter-terrorist agent, Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) as he attempts to thwart terrorist attacks in real time. When necessary, Jack often resorts to torturing suspects. In *The Christian Science Monitor* in 2014, writer David Mataconis asked a pertinent and relevant question in the title of his article “*Did 24 Help Make Torture Acceptable?*” Mataconis writes, “*Bauer and his rotating cast of enablers had no choice but to go rogue.... He didn’t like torturing terrorists, but that damn clock was always ticking in the corner of your screen, and neither he nor we had the time for legal niceties*.”²⁵

With the threat of another 9/11 always looming, Americans made their choice that torture, in crucial situations, was necessary. For eight years on the air as a top-rated program, *24* pushed this agenda. It was one that dovetailed nicely with the Bush Administration’s refrain that the next attack on

America *"come in the form of a mushroom cloud,"* as President Bush said on 10/08/02²⁶ or the more-commonly remembered variant of the same phrase, *"We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud,"* as Condoleezza Rice spoke the words on 9/08/02.²⁷ A frightened American populace, fearing millions of casualties in a nuclear strike, approved torture of suspects as an acceptable alternative to the prospect of such total destruction and misery.

At least one idea behind the torture porn genre is that if America is willing to violate its idealistic soul and beliefs in personal freedom to commit torture, then that idea would "trickle down" to the rest of the world, thus endangering American citizens too.

On February 7, 2002, President Bush signed a memo "Humane Treatment of Taliban and al Qaeda Detainees" that essentially *"authorized and directed"* the *"formal abandonment of America's commitment to key provisions of the Geneva Convention."* According to Andrew Cohen's article in *The Atlantic*, *"The Torture Memos, 10 Years Later,"* it was this memo that *"marked"* America's descent *"into torture."* The loophole that allowed such torture was that al Qaeda was considered a stateless entity, and so the provisions of the Geneva Convention did not apply to it.

In practice, this meant that America could warehouse captured enemy combatants at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba or Abu Ghraib in Iraq without ever giving them a fair trial. It meant that said prisoners could be questioned without due process, using what the Bush Administration euphemistically termed *"enhanced interrogation techniques."* These techniques included waterboarding, sleep disruption, deprivation of food and water, and medically unnecessary procedures such as *"rectal feeding."* In Gitmo at least, the rules for detaining, holding, and processing prisoners created a Kafka-esque type system from which detainees could never escape. Roughly eighty percent of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay were actually captured by Pakistanis and Afghans for a bounty (5,000 dollars apiece), but because they were not afforded fair trials, they could not prove their innocence.²⁸ They weren't terrorists, per se. They were moneymakers, cash cows for local warlords who wanted to get rich.

For Americans, the realization that their government was torturing prisoners in the name of their security arrived in mid-2004. Journalist Seymour Hersh wrote an expose published in *The New Yorker* *"Torture at Abu Ghraib,"* which revealed that from October through December of 2003, prisoners at the prison had been subject to *"sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuse"*²⁹ at the hands of their wardens in the American military. The guards had been accused of beating and sodomizing prisoners, attacking detainees with dogs, and taunting and humiliating naked prisoners. Photographs of these *"enhanced interrogation techniques"* reached the press and led President Bush to explain that it was the work of a *"few bad apples."* No responsibility was taken for the memos which negated the Geneva Convention, or which authorized the enhanced interrogation techniques.

Some in the right-wing press, wishing to support its President and mitigate the disgust many Americans felt for abuse and torture, claimed that waterboarding was not so bad. Fox News' anchor Sean Hannity, for instance suggested that waterboarding was not actually a torture method on 5/20/09, and told his guest, Charles Grodin, that he would submit to waterboarding to prove it was not torture. *"I'll do it for charity. I'll let you do it. I'll do it for the troop's families,"* Hannity promised Grodin and his viewers, live on-air.³⁰

As of this book's writing in 2020, Hannity had still not scheduled his promised charitable good deed or supported the troops families by undergoing the waterboarding procedure. Perhaps, post-Bush Administration, Hannity no longer felt it necessary to carry, if you'll forgive the pun, its water on state-sanctioned torture.

The point is that the culture from 2000 to 2009, from pop-entertainment like *24* and *Passion of the Christ*, to secret government memos, to Fox News—was consumed with the idea of torture and its place in war, law enforcement, and prison.

Given the evidence that torture occurred, how could critics, like the one in *City Beat*, claim that torture porn horror movies had no deeper purpose or theme? Art always imitates life. And if torture porn horror movies were dark, sadistic and upsetting, it may just be that it was mirroring what it saw happening in American culture. But horror movies didn't start the culture's fascination with torture and abuse. Rather, the best of the torture porn horror films accomplished what great horror films have

always accomplished; they made the audience look at itself and what was happening in its name.

The debate itself—re-argued endlessly with the arrival of each new *Saw* or *Hostel* installment—is hypocritical to a large extent. Some of the same genre voices who so vociferously defended and championed the once-hated slasher movie trend of the 1980s were among the first to jump on the bandwagon deriding torture porn. Yet in both cases, these horror films (whether slasher or torture porn) decisively reflect what's happening in American culture. One can't (or at least shouldn't) blame torture porn efforts for holding up a mirror to our contemporary beliefs, to current events, to modern mind-sets and fallacies. Certainly, the torture porn films—just like the slasher films that came before them—abundantly feature their own brand of highs and lows. But to dismiss an entire sub-genre out of hand with an easy, negative label is to miss out on some powerful, worthwhile material.

This author is old enough to remember when it was the slasher film that was termed an “*incitement to violence*,” and directors of the form (including John Carpenter and Brian De Palma) were actually called “*pornographers*” by the likes of journalists such as Zina Klapper, writing in *Ms. Magazine*.³¹ This author is old enough to remember when Janet Maslin in *The New York Times* (back in 1982) wrote of slashers: “*you leave the theater convinced that the world is an ugly, violent place in which aggression is frequent and routine*.”³² This author remembers when *Commonweal*'s critic, Tom O'Brien said that *Friday the 13th* “*literalizes the violence against women [that] feminist groups have identified as the core of pornography*.”³³

Today, not a single *Friday the 13th* movie or other slasher film of the 1980s can compare in terms of severity of on-screen violence to a typical episode of *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), which wallowed in castration, incest, rape, murder, torture, beheadings and other atrocities for seven seasons to a degree that makes the 1980s horror films, and even some 2000s torture films, look like children's fairy tales by comparison.

What the over-the-top reaction to torture porn filmmaking in the 2000s reveals, perhaps, is the fact the mainstream press is ever eager to welcome horror with closed arms and unwilling to view it with respect, or the presumption that it boasts artistic intentions. Many in the press always wants to link horror and pornography, and in this decade, the press was more successful in that agenda than ever before. The Torture Porn controversy of the 2000s proved that many of the horror genre's scholars, critics, and writers had grown just as old and inflexible as the previous generation of genre gatekeepers had. The Old Guard had revered Hammer or Universal films by putting down slasher movies.

Now the generation that revered slasher movies was putting down Torture Porn.

One of the main ideas underlining the torture-porn cycle in the horror film is indeed pro-social. And that idea is that nobody escapes from the violence unscathed. A good person (like a good nation) might escape the lion's share of the violence, but to do so, would have to cut off a limb (or a sense of conscience? Its soul?).

No longer were there going to be “clean” victories over boogymen, only wars of attrition in which the most whole—though not completely whole—would emerge victorious. Good torture porn movies, like good horror films of all stripes, are all about pushing boundaries, about shattering taboos, about transgressing traditional senses of decorum, and that's what films like *Hostel*, *Saw*, the *Last House on the Left* remake and *Martyrs* accomplish.

The question becomes: are these transgressions based purely on puerile, sadistic impulses? Or do they carry with them a higher *aesthetic* purpose? Do these movies tell us something critical about “*who we are*” at this juncture in history? Is there a purpose and morality to the violence featured on screen, or is it all just bread and circuses?

The simple answer, of course—*exactly like the slasher film before it*—is that the fair-minded individual and reviewer should take each example on its own merits, and judge on a case-by-case basis. One should not paint an entire classification of horror film with one easy brushstroke.

At its apex, the torture porn format addresses several important aspects of War on Terror culture with cogent authority. First, it reflects the reality that the media *already* inundates us on the 24-hours cable news networks with ultra-violent images on a nearly daily basis. From government-authorized imagery of vanquished enemy corpses (Saddam's Hussein's sons) to battlefield imagery itself, America

has witnessed a lot of real-life “horror” since 9/11. Citizens saw torture in the photographs from the Abu Ghraib scandal, and also fictional torture performed routinely by American “heroes” like Jack Bauer on 24. And the *New York Times* wouldn’t even use the word “torture” when the term applied to the United States doing it. When we torture, it’s “*coercive interrogation techniques*.” President Bush has also said he would authorize water boarding all over again.

To quote Bob Dole: “*where’s the outrage?*”

The answer? It’s in the *moral barometer* of the horror film. If we visit torture upon others for our own reasons, is it right for other nations to visit torture upon our people, on Americans? This is the subtext or context of the *Hostel* films: *blowback*.

Even if we truly boast noble motives for torture (preserving security, sponsoring democracy across the world) does that behavior make us heroes or monsters? The self-same question applies to Jigsaw (Tobin Bell), a horror movie icon who also has “pure” motives for the torture he inflicts upon others. He wants to “help” them. He wants to “free them” from their demons.

The very best of the torture porn films deal with this admittedly gruesome subject matter in a thoughtful manner. *Martyrs* seems to ask, what comes after torture? What arises inside a person after such brutality? Until Americans deal decisively and responsibly with what was done in our names, for our “security,” this repressed evil will bubble up and return as symptoms, certainly in our entertainment, especially our *dark* entertainment. The form mirrors our worst fears, our darkest psychological demons. Horror can comment on our times in a way that other genres can’t and don’t. Love them or hate them, torture porn films fit this definition to a tee. They live up to the historical legacy of the horror format.

Don’t blame the messenger. Torture porn films may not be to everyone’s personal taste, but at the very least they have a right to exist, and more-so, serve a valuable social purpose within the pop culture, at least in the War on Terror Age.



The *Twilight Saga* (2008–2012) brought a new spin on vampires, another familiar screen monster reinvented for the 21st century. Here, franchise stars Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson) and Bella Swan (Kristen Stewart) enjoy a daytime swim.

“You made the world in your image. Now I make it in mine”: Vampires

One of the oldest monsters of the cinema, the vampire, underwent some major changes in the 1990s. Films such as *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992) and the Anne Rice adaptation *Interview with a Vampire* (1994) introduced romance and Byronic heroism into the mix. No longer was the vampire a solitary, repulsive figure who expressed the idea of a foreign invasion of the western world. Instead, the vampire was often attractive, isolated, and broody about their eternal torment. Taking the opposite approach, some vampire films of the 1990s, such as *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) and *John Carpenter’s Vampires* (1998) de-romanticized the vampire. Set in the American southwest, or Mexico, these films positioned the vampires as bottom-feeding scavengers and desert-dwellers.

Perhaps the biggest influence on 2000s horror films, however, came from a beloved 1990s TV franchise by former geek king, Joss Whedon. That franchise consisted of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), and its spin-off, *Angel* (1999–2005). In both series, vampires were transformed into James Dean-type loners who carried the burden of their long lives and appetite for blood. Angel (David

Boreanaz) was a brooding, regretful introvert, and a hunk. Spike (James Marsters) was an acerbic, British punk-rocker in leather, with dyed blond hair, who, like Angel, actually sported a sensitive soul. At least once he acquired one.

So, while the series extraordinary hero, Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) battled and staked monstrous vampires, she also romanced them. Leading into the 2000s vampires, though immortal, were young ... and hot.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer had an enormous impact on the decade of the 2000s, and the idea of gorgeous, young-appearing vampires was ubiquitous. Jonathan Schaech was a vampire pack leader in the road movie, *The Forsaken* (2001), which also was set in the American southwest. And Jonathan Rhys Meyers played a similarly attractive vampire cult leader, though not named as a creature of the night, in *Octane* (2003). Meanwhile, direct-to-video sequels to *Vampires* and *From Dusk Till Dawn*, such as *Los Muertos* (2002) or *The Hangman's Daughter* (2000) attempted to continue the desert scavenger motif, but with limited success, or interest from viewers.

Instead, a series of books by author Stephenie Meyer, took the baton from *Buffy*, and featured even younger, broodier vampires in *The Twilight Saga*, which began its cinematic run in 2008.

"*Buffy kicked off the longest vampire surge yet*," Christopher Beam and Chris Wilson wrote in *Slate*, "The Garlic Years," in 2009, "*opening the door to Blade, the Underworld films, John Carpenter's Vampires, Van Helsing and the multimedia blockbuster Twilight series. By any measure, 2006 was the vampirest year of all time.*"³⁴

Twilight proved a massive hit and pop culture touchstone, both in terms of the books, and their movie adaptations. Meyer's books sold 100 million copies, and with the movies grossed more than 500 million dollars at the box office. *The Twilight Saga* led almost immediately to further vampire stories on TV, notably *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–2016) and *True Blood* (2008–2014). Both those series, like the *Twilight Saga*, featured sexually attractive and active vampires, who fell in love with human women.

It was a huge shift in the form of the vampire.

No longer was the monster a creature of repulsive appearance, representing non-western ideals slipping into western society. The Dracula Paradigm was replaced. Instead, the vampires of *Twilight* lived in the Pacific Northwest, attempted to accommodate in American culture as immigrants, essentially, and, though hundreds of years old, did things like attend local American high schools, and date high school girls. *Twilight* was the story of Bella, a young woman in the town of Forks, and her love story with a pale vampire named Edward Cullen. Edward resisted their relationship for fear of hurting the human girl, but Bella only wanted to move deeper into his exotic (and erotic?) world.

"*I see a change in the western world in terms of greater acceptance, understanding and empathy with the concept of difference*," suggest Dr. Magdalena Grabias, an assistant professor in *Cultural Studies* in 2016. "*The vampire is increasingly being portrayed as a hero rather than as a villain, in a reversal of the role.*"³⁵

"*Meyer's vampires could walk around in daylight like The Lost Boys, were devastatingly alluring like Anne Rice's Lestat, and called themselves vegetarians, preferring to drink only animal blood like Rice's Louis—but their skin also literally glittered in the sun, a purely YA romance-tailored addition*," wrote author Devon Maloney in *Wired*, in 2014. The author called the series "*whitewashed vampire romance to the nth degree.*"³⁶



The Anne Rice Chronicles, with its Byronic vampires, also tried for a reboot in the 2000s with *Queen of the Damned* starring Aaliyah (front and center) and Stuart Townsend as Lestat.

Although incredibly popular, particularly with young teenage women, the *Twilight Saga* was immediately controversial with long-time horror fans who, in the 2000s, had a powerful public platform by which to deride the series. One prominent horror blogger of the age, for instance, termed the series, repeatedly, “*Twatlight*.” The hatred towards the saga was venomous, and instead of horror fans lining up on Team Edward or Team Jacob (Bella’s werewolf suitor), they lined up as either pro-*Twilight* or anti-*Twilight*.

The anti-*Twilight* camp viewed the series as anti-feminist, with bland heroine Bella seeming to be “the epitome of submissive passivity.”³⁷ In particular, Edward compared his attraction to Bella to a drug addiction in the 2008 film, meaning his response to her presence was chemical, not anything that had to do with her personality, or agency.

And Bella's choice, to lock herself into a romantic relationship in which she was in physical danger, since sex with vampires results in bruises and cuts, was seen by many as a choice to be a victim. Unlike Whedon's feminist icon, Buffy, who was a grand evolution of the Final Girl trope, *Twilight's* Bella seemed to many writers a huge step backwards, a woman who defined herself only by which man, or "team," she chose to be with.

Author Meyer insisted that *Twilight* was a work of feminist fiction, not anti-feminist, and defended her characters and franchise. "*In my own opinion, (key word), the foundation of feminism is this: being able to choose. The core of anti-feminism, is, conversely, telling a woman she can't do something solely because she's a woman—taking any choice away from her specifically because of her gender.*"³⁸

In other words, Bella had the right to choose to be in a painful, physically dangerous relationship, because it was her desire, her choice to do so.

As the closing years of the decade came, debates about *Twilight* raged.

Was it even horror?

Was it anti-feminist, or pro-feminist?

Was *Twilight* a degradation and bastardization of the vampire myth, or simply a natural evolution of the monster, post Buffy and Angel?

Well, ticket buyers had spoken.

Despite its dismissal," the authors of *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media and The Vampire Franchise*, write "*the female-oriented Twilight franchise is comparable in profit and cultural impact to other well-respected media franchises such as Lord of the Rings, Pirates of the Caribbean and Harry Potter.*"³⁹

Others who had derided *Twilight* during its theatrical run ultimately came to the viewpoint that the primarily male-driven mainstream press had derided Meyers' saga because it was designed not for their enjoyment, but for the enjoyment of an apparently underserved demographic: teenage girls. "*What is the difference between Twilight moms who turn their bedrooms into shrines for Edward and Bella, and Dads who did the same thing for Star Wars, Star Trek, or any other male-targeted franchise?*" asked Princess Weekes in *The Mary Sue*, in 2018. "*The difference is that we have assumed that one has more value, even at its weakest points, than the other.*"⁴⁰

Of this, there can be no doubt.

While critics of *Twilight* worked long and hard to argue that it was anti-feminist (and indeed, it might very well be), the same critics championed *Star Wars*, a saga which, when it began in 1977, featured a universe with literally no people of color and also highlighted Nazi imagery in its film-ending medal ceremony on Yavin 4. This observation is not meant to put down *Star Wars*, but, as always, to point out that not all popular franchises are created equal in the eyes of critics and the press.

The *Twilight* films are not, in the eyes of this writer, particularly well-made or involving. They seem humorless (especially compared to *Buffy*), and derivative (again, compared to the *Buffyverse*). They also would not fit this author's definition of "feminism."

However, critics of *Twilight*—including this author—should acknowledge that, in many cases, these films were not aimed at them, or made for them. The widespread dismissal of *Twilight* by establishment critics might be viewed in some ways, as a dismissal of the idea that teenage girls deserve a pop culture franchise that speaks to them and their interests.

Twilight was not the only vampire game in town in the 2000s. If *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* appears (the superior) inspiration for that *Twilight Saga*, another franchise took its cues from another popular movie franchise: *The Matrix* (1999).

As noted in *Vox*, by author Peter Suderman, *Underworld* (2003) "*borrow[s] a number of surface attributes*" from *The Matrix* "*including the superpowered gunplay and stylish black fetish-war costuming. Like the Matrix, it features gun-toting characters in long, dark coats, blasting their way through grimy corridors.*"⁴¹

Derided in some circles as "vampires with gun movies," *Underworld* and the vast majority of its sequels (excluding 2009's *Rise of the Lycans*) focused on a vampire death dealer named Selene, played by Kate Beckinsale. Like *Twilight*, the *Underworld* series focused on vampire vs. werewolf (er, Lycans...)

tensions, though in this case those tensions resulted in war. The focus was heavily on action, rather than horror, which again demonstrated a post-*Scream* (1996) desire on the part of filmmakers to throw old elements into a blender and create a new sub-genre.

The Underworld saga often featured confusing plots and exposition, and incoherent editing, yet nonetheless made a star of Beckinsale. The films also featured a consistent look which many critics described as being the color equivalent of black and white, without really being black-and-white. *The Underworld* films were all shaded in tones of blues and silvers, and this consistent canvas hid a multitude of dramatic sins.

The Blade series, which had begun in 1998, also continued into the first decade of the 21st century with *Blade 2* (2002), and *Blade: Trinity* (2004). Like the *Underworld* films, the sequels featured vampires, but concentrated on super-heroic action rather than the traditional narrative territory of the horror film.

If *Twilight* and *Underworld* met with mixed approval from critics, though approbation from audiences, the opposite was true of *Let the Right One In* (2008), a sensitive vampire film from Sweden. Set in the 1980s, the film concerned a lonely boy who befriended a vampire, another outsider, in a wintry world of unending snow. The horror blogger community took up a strong defense of the film, even if general audiences did not buy the mood piece as the defining vampire film of the decade.



In the 2000s, even the most respected and classic screen vampires returned. Top: Gerard Butler plays a hunky Count Dracula in *Wes Craven Presents Dracula 2000*. Bottom: Dracula has taken two brides, Vitamin C (left) and Jennifer Esposito (right).

Some old vampire standards were also updated for the aughts. *Wes Craven Presents Dracula 2000* brought Bram Stoker's character back but, according to press materials, this time as “*the most sensual and sexual of all our modern anti-heroes*,” according to film director Patrick Lussier.⁴² Anne Rice's Lestat also returned to the screen as a rock star, in *Queen of the Damned* (2001).

Video Games: Game Over?

What happens when two art forms that are not widely appreciated by the mainstream press or

mainstream academia join forces?

If history is a guide, then the result is, mostly, enhanced critical disdain.

In the 2000s, video games and horror cinema combined in a series of cinematic efforts such as *Resident Evil* (2002), *House of the Dead* (2003), *Alone in the Dark* (2004), *Doom* (2005), and *Silent Hill* (2006).

Of course, because of their commonalities, video games and horror movies should be a match made in pop culture heaven. As scholar Bernard Perron writes in his book, *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, “the goals of video games and the goals of horror fiction directly overlap, making them ideal bedfellows.”⁴³ He expands on this notion by observing that “since horror works best the less that is explained and more that is left to the imagination, it maps well to game storytelling.”⁴⁴

Alas, that has not been the case, or at least it was not the case during the span 2000–2009. According to author Scott A. Lukas in *Horror Video Game Remakes and the Question of the Medium: Remaking Doom, Silent Hill and Resident Evil*, “the video game transformed as film problematizes the category of remake and also complicates the genre and territorial distinctions of video games and cinema.”⁴⁵

In other words, horror film remakes of video games tend to suffer the same disdain that remakes of horror film classics (such as *Halloween*), or J-Horror remakes invariably do. They are widely deemed illegitimate spawn of superior source materials. The “faithfulness” question is universally raised. Is the movie faithful to the gameplay? If not, it is judged a creative failure.

On the question of what makes a good remake, there are precious few criteria. In fact, the same is true of video games. Widely-speaking, video games are not often considered works of arts. In the July 2006 edition of *Esquire*, for instance, in the column *Chuck Klosterman’s America*, the author penned a piece called “The Lester Bangs of Video Games.” He concluded (perhaps rightly) that there is no Lester Bangs of video games. He wrote:

There are still people in America who do not take video games seriously. These are the same people who question the relevance of hip-hop and assume newspapers will still exist in twenty-five years. It’s hard to find an irrefutably accurate statistic for the economic value of the video-game industry, but the best estimates seem to be around \$28 billion. As such, I’m not going to waste any space trying to convince people that gaming is important. If you’re reading this column, I’m just going to assume that you believe video games in 2006 are the cultural equivalent of rock music in 1967, because that’s (more or less) reality.⁴⁶

Klosterman’s column raises an important question. Are critics missing the boat on what is potentially the most influential art form of the 21st century? Have we—as a culture—and as critics—failed to come up with a common lexicon for legitimate criticism of video games? Klosterman sees the gap in video game “criticism” as arising directly from the fact that games are seen as “product” and little more. They are not seen in terms of narrative, but rather in terms of playability. This would be a little like going to the movies and reviewing the quality of the auditorium seating. If Mr. Klosterman is right and—outside of product—there exists no common set of aesthetic criteria for “video game criticism,” how can one judge movies based on video games?

Gazing at the video game adaptations of the 2000s without some criteria for aesthetic success, they appear a mangy bunch. *House of the Dead* is widely considered one of the worst films of the decade. *Doom* is not regarded much differently. It is a sub-par *Aliens* (1986)–type film with a diverse group of soldiers battling uninspiring alien monsters. *Resident Evil* spawned a successful horror movie franchise, but in doing so went far astray, narratively and in terms of characters, from the video game experience. The franchise, which headlines a strong female star, Milla Jovovich, went big for spectacular action sequence, apocalypse movie homages, and zombie tropes, rather than settling down in for a “haunted mansion” vibe, as was the case in the early *Resident Evil* games.

That leaves only *Silent Hill*, inarguably the best of the 2000s video-game horror bunch, and an Orphean Journey through an underworld. Directed by Christopher Gans, *Silent Hill* finds room and space for a mood of alienation and isolation, as well as boss battles.

Intriguingly, two other horror films of the 2000s focused on the idea of horror video games but were not based on popular games. The first film was *Hellworld* (2005), a direct-to-video *Hellraiser*

sequel. The film lived in the world of horror movies, fan conventions, cosplay, and video games, with a kind of early MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) as the galvanizing or organizing principle of the film.

Stay Alive (2006), by contrast, concerned a horror survival game (like *Resident Evil*), featuring the Countess Bathory as a “boss.” Rather than charting new territory, except in terms of CGI visualizations of gameplay, *Stay Alive* resurrected the *Nightmare on Elm Street* rubber reality paradigm: die in a dream (or in a video game) and characters would also die in reality.



The zombies are coming! The zombies are coming! This still from Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) showcases the most popular monster of the 2000s, the zombie.

“Don’t get all stingy with your bullets”: Zombies

The zombie is, perhaps, the greatest screen monster of the first decade of the 21st century. Zombies appeared often throughout the decade in found footage films (like *The Zombie Diaries* [2006], in light-hearted comedies like *Shaun of the Dead* [2004], in films based on video games like *Resident Evil* [2002]) and in remakes such as Zack Snyder’s *Dawn of the Dead* (2004).

Zombie maestro George A. Romero, who had not helmed a “living dead” zombie film since 1985, returned in the 2000s with three such sequels: *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009). But there were many other zombie grace notes throughout the decade as well, efforts such as *Fido* (2007), which explored racism as it applied to domesticated zombies, and *Deadgirl* (2008), which concerned young human males behaving badly towards a female zombie.

With its focus on serial killers and interlopers, the 1990s had seen very few zombie films produced, but the monsters were back with a vengeance in the George W. Bush era. The popularity of this cinematic monster has been attributed to several factors that dovetailed with the emerging 21st-century culture. As pointed out by horror author Jonathan Mayberry in *Newsweek* in 2010, the zombie is “a stand-in for anything we fear: pandemic, racism, societal change, depersonalization of humanity,” or “pervasive threats.”⁴⁷ The zombie, in the author’s words, are a “never-ending blank canvas.”⁴⁸ They are thus a “fascinating study of our country’s historical fears,”⁴⁹ in the words of *Vox Magazine* in 2016.

These sources prove just how useful the zombie is as a “popular” monster, since it can represent different things and different aspects of society at different times. In terms of the 2000s, however, the zombie may most be associated with war, and economics, and the failure of leadership under President George W. Bush to manage these disasters effectively.

Consider that a zombie is a monster that has come back from the dead, but it is not alive, either. It is a destructive, consuming beast with no soul, no reason, and no purpose but to consume. This description of the zombie as something dead or corrupt that returns to imperil society anew might be applied both to the War on Terror, which failed to heed the lessons of the Vietnam War, and to George W. Bush’s economic policy, which failed to learn the lessons of the first Bush recession, following the huge deficits of the Reagan Era. Both felt like zombie threats from a bygone era.

In Reagan’s time, pundits and even W’s father, George H.W. Bush himself, discussed the danger of the Gipper’s “voodoo economics,” and the fact that trickle-down policies would do nothing but further enrich the wealthy while destroying the American middle class. In 2010, author John Quiggin wrote a treatise which he called *Zombie Economics: How Dead Ideas Still Walk Among Us*, and the author noted that “a zombie idea is one that keeps coming back, despite being killed.”⁵⁰ His thesis is that those in power—in the press, in big business, and in government in the 2000s—were dominated by zombie or failed economic ideas.

In fact, Bush’s father, President George H.W. Bush, had been ousted from the presidency after an economic recession and a deepening of the budget deficit. His son’s economic policies double-downed on the same mistakes. When Bill Clinton left office in 2000, he had, through sound management of the economy and the power of the Internet boom, erased the Reagan-Bush deficits of the 1980s and early 1990s and created a surplus of 290 billion dollars. By the end of the second Bush era, however, that surplus was history. It had been given away through tax cuts to the rich via the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 and the Job and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003. As a result, the U.S. deficit stood at 485 billion when Bush the younger left office. In practical terms, those tax cuts meant that the government would receive 1.2 trillion dollars less over a ten-year period. It was money that might have been used to finance the expensive War on Terror, which added 2.4 trillion dollars to the national debt.

But the real zombie idea of the 2000s wasn’t just the decision to engage by choice in an expensive, difficult, ongoing, unpopular war (Iraq) again, or to offer giveaways to the rich. The zombie idea was deeper.

Specifically, it was the notion that a political party and leader who did not believe in the ability of government to help people would somehow prove competent managers of the government during times

of crisis such as the decade's terrorist attacks, the two recessions of (2001 and 2008, respectively) and national disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.

Since the 1980s, the concept of "*Starve the Beast*" (a term reputedly originated by a Reagan staffer in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1985) had dominated conservative thinking about the government. The idea was that Republicans in power could so reduce government funds through tax giveaways to the rich that they could shrink the Federal government to the size where it could be "*strangled in the bathtub*." In other words, the government would be so small that it would not be able to take on big things like retirement benefits or universal health care.

But despite the economic fall-out of the Reagan years, voters sent George W. Bush to the White House in the 2000s so he could make the same mistakes. Yet what voters found during his eight years in office was, again, that someone who doesn't believe in the ability of government to help the common man is not someone who can marshal its resources to help the common man when disaster occurs. Lest one forget, George W. Bush's choice to lead FEMA was neophyte Michael Brown, a neophyte whose previous experience had been to serve as Commissioner for the International Arabian Horse Association.

When Hurricane Katrina struck the gulf coast, the Bush Administration and FEMA were caught flatfooted and unprepared to help. Again, if the government is to be starved, if the government is to be drowned in a bathtub, what happens in a time of hurricanes, war, or even pandemic? Americans, having gone down the road of such incompetence before, shouldn't have gone for the zombie idea in the 2000s that things would turn out better by doing the same thing all over again.

Accordingly, many of the zombie films of the 2000s concern the breakdown of American infrastructure during an apocalypse. Leadership fails, and the zombie plague spreads. A failure of a U.S. military occupation in Britain is the subject matter of *28 Weeks Later* (2006), a reflection of the poor leadership during the Iraq War, as the counterinsurgency spread. The film concerns a London where the zombie plague is believed to be "*in its final throes*," as Vice President Dick Cheney might report. Instead, it comes back swinging and the city is overrun.

George Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005) involves the way that wealthy leaders look out for their own economic well-being, while gatekeeping the door to wealth for others. The leader of a post-zombie society, played by Dennis Hooper, sees all the wealth concentrated at the top of the community, while those at the bottom must work dangerous jobs, such as procuring supplies from zombie-ridden towns nearby, without getting to enjoy any of the rewards. According to the text *The Subversive Zombie*, by Elizabeth Aiossa, the film "*focuses on broad and scathing criticism of Bush-era war mongering and classicism, and on an evolving and organizing zombie union....*"⁵¹

These and other zombie films of the 2000–2009 period focus heavily on the idea that in a zombie outbreak, the government would collapse. After years of failure to plan adequately, or budget for a disaster, the government's profound failure would result in anarchy in the land of the free and the home of the brave. These films might even be viewed as wish-fulfillment fantasies for blue collar workers who had gone bankrupt, lost their retirement during the Great Recession, or even have seen their families go without adequate health care because it was too expensive. In the zombie apocalypse, the rich elite would not make the rules for long, as seen by the downfall of the occupation in *28 Weeks Later*, or the collapse of the society in *Land of the Dead*.

Rather, the plague rewards "*skills in auto main-tenance, farming, plumbing and electrical work*" and would land "*blue collar folks at the top of the new social order*."⁵² The fear of zombie overrun was thus also a fear of the rich and wealthy that they would suddenly no longer be able to control the world and its financial agenda, and that their skill set—nurtured on Wall Street—would not be a required survival tool in the new social realm.

In the zombie films, the skills of the blue collar and middle-class strike back, in a way, against the financial, corporate sector. It is their skills and most importantly, their competence, that would save the world.

The zombie films of the 2000s are all about the government failing to save the people, and from the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 to the Bush Administration's failure to evacuate in a timely fashion the

Louisiana Superdome following Hurricane Katrina's landfall in 2005, the American people had plenty of opportunity to witness, often on CNN, often in real time, their government's failure to help those Americans in need in a crisis.

If not the American people's, whose interest was the government actually serving?

"Probably the most notable impact of 9/11 on zombie movies," writes Peter Dendle in *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia Volume 2, 2000–2010*, "was a general sense that in a time of crisis people would not be able to depend on authorities for help."⁵³ Dendle notes that the real life imagery people saw following Katrina was bracing: "American were horrified at the images of citizens trapped in the Superdome without food or water, of rampant looting and heavy-handed police violence, and of bodies lying uncollected in the streets, images, in short, of a desperate, lawless wasteland, where civilization had become unraveled in only a few short days."⁵⁴

On a much more grounded level, the 2000s brought up a new debate on the nature of the zombie itself. Could zombies ... run?

Old-school horror fans, weaned on decades of George A. Romero's Living Dead movies, preferred the old-school zombie shuffle; the slow-moving ghoul. But a new generation of filmmaker reveled in the chaos and anarchy created by a heretofore unseen breed of running zombie, one who could overtake its victims in record time with animal ferocity. Josh Levin wrote in *Slate Magazine* in March of 2004 about the roiling debate in horror circles about the two types of zombies. The original *Dawn of the Dead* (1979) "hammered home the slow zombie's metaphorical possibilities," he suggested while, the remake's ultra-quick zombies perhaps represented a "modern taste for individualism."⁵⁵

PG-13 Horror Films, the Dangers of "Ratings Creep" and CGI

Although the PG-13 designation had been created by the MPAA in the mid-1980s, it was the decade of 9/11 that brought a slew of Hollywood horror movies with that particular rating.

This was a contradiction, it seems.

The same decade that brought viewers hard "R" movies such as those in the brutal *Saw* or *Hostel* franchise, simultaneously went in the other direction, bringing PG-13 horror films such as *The Ring* (2002), *AVP* (2004) and *White Noise* (2005) to younger horror enthusiasts.

The glut of PG-13 horror movies in the first decade of the 21st century, typically, pleased no particular demographic, except, perhaps, for Hollywood accountants. Societal watchdogs and moral guardians warned strenuously of "ratings creep," the notion that films which would have, in previous decades, been rated R (for ages 17 and up, only) for gory imagery had instead gotten by in the 2000s with the PG-13 rating, thus exposing damaging imagery and ideas to teenagers instead of those on the verge of adulthood.

According to author Filipna Antunes, who has studied extensively the PG-13 rating and its impact, these gatekeepers feared that "the existence of PG-13 has exposed children to some adult content that was previously controlled, thus challenging the meaning and purpose of the R rating and opening to the doors to concerns over child protection."⁵⁶ In her book, *Children Beware! Childhood, Horror and the PG-13 Rating* (2020), Antunes also described how the PG-13 rating was viewed by many as having "blurred the boundaries"⁵⁷ between PG and R.

Horror fans were livid, however, to see the glut of PG-13 horror films released during the decade. To the committed horror aficionado, a PG-13 designation meant that horror could not really be, well, horror, at least in the traditional sense. Historically, films such as *Alien* (1979), *The Shining* (1980), or *Friday the 13th* (1980) were rated R (Restricted) and therefore free to pursue their goriest and most taboo-shattering impulses. The very idea of PG-13 horror films portended a rounding-off or blunting of the genre's rough edges, it's very character.

Indeed, previous to *AVP*, for example, every individual entry in both the *Alien* and *Predator* franchise had been rated R. They were seen as not having shied away from the grotesque and monstrous aspects of their narratives. Now, suddenly, when those two iconic characters were to meet face to face

on-screen for the first time, however, the impact of that meeting would be blunted by strictures of PG-13. In practice, the PG-13 rating meant less blood, less chest-bursting, and fewer human skinning ... all staples of the popular franchises. Horror fans, such as those at the website *Whatculture* referred to PG-13 as “*The Diet Coke of horror*” and concluded that the genre, in this format simply “*doesn’t work*.”⁵⁸

On one hand, social scientists feared that PG-13 ratings would open the doorway to damage young psyches with aforementioned ratings creep. On the other hand, horror fans were alienated by the possibility that their favorite franchises, and even new films in the genre would be hamstrung by attempting to appeal to a wider audience. A study conducted in 2011 found at least some evidence that the watchdogs had the upper hand in the debate, at least in terms of factual evidence. According to the authors of “MPAA Ratings Creep: A Longitudinal Analysis of the PG-13 Rating Category in U.S. Movies,” there were “*increases in violent content in the PG-13 rating*” during the period data was analyzed, 1988, 1997 and 2006, showcasing what the authors termed a “*leniency towards violent content*” by the M.P.A.A.⁵⁹

Even though the battle lines were drawn in the 2000s by those who saw the PG-13 rating as a slippery slope towards child endangerment and those who saw it as a watering down of the horror genre’s very character, one demographic was pleased, the aforementioned accountants.

According to the article “Scary Business: Horror at the North American Box Office, 2006–2016,” the average budgets for “*PG-13 horror films are significantly higher (37.4 million) than R-rated films (25.1 million), as are box office returns (81.6 million vs. 51.5 million.)*”⁶⁰ Right there, perhaps is the true motive behind the move to so many PG-13 horror movies in the 2000s: the necessity to broaden the genre’s appeal in the new century.

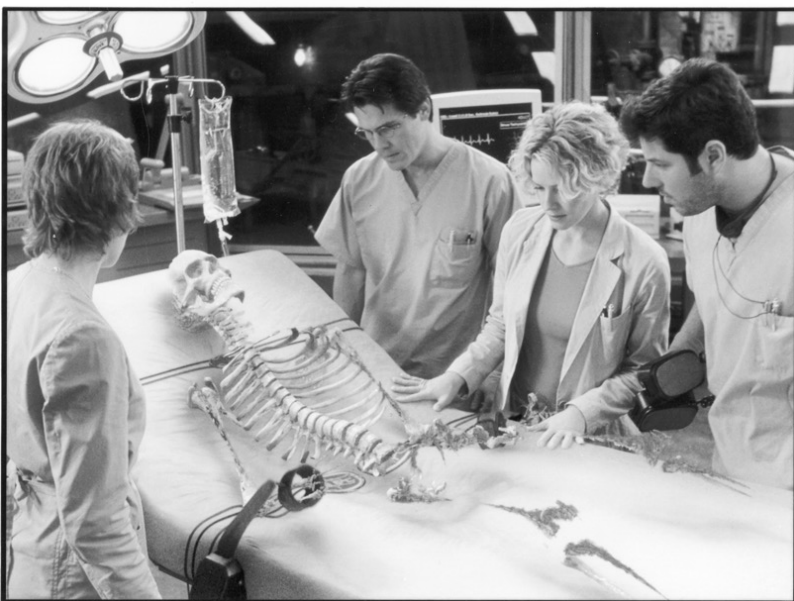
In addition to *The Ring*, *AVP*, and *White Noise*, other notable PG-13 horror films of the 2000s include *They* (2002), *Darkness Falls* (2003), *The Grudge* (2004), *Boogeyman* (2005), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Fog* (2005), *When a Stranger Calls* (2005), *Pulse* (2006), *Stay Alive* (2006), *The Messengers* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), *One Missed Call* (2008), *Prom Night* (2008), *Shutter* (2008), and *Drag Me to Hell* (2009).

Meanwhile, the 2000s is the demarcation point in horror films in terms of special effects presentation. In decades past, practical effects had dominated the genre. By the 2000s, CGI—computer generated imagery—had become the industry standard. For horror aficionados, this was not a happy trade-off. CGI monsters, like werewolves, tended to look cartoonish rather than real. It wasn’t merely that they looked unreal, but that they moved in unreal fashion, because gravity was not a factor for these digital creations the way it is in our reality. Similarly, CGI blood spatter simply could not prove as gloriously messy and chaotic as the blood floods of eras gone by.



CGI special effects became the norm in the 2000s horror cinema. Here, an invisible scientist is rendered (skinless) using that technology in Paul Verhoeven's *Hollow Man* (2000). Left: Elisabeth Shue, right: the

computer-generated representation of Kevin Bacon's Dr. Sebastian Caine.



Two more views of *Hollow Man*'s stunning (for their time) CGI effects. Top: Elisabeth Shue's Dr. McKay is menaced by an invisible, bandaged Dr. Caine (Kevin Bacon). Bottom: Cain's team (facing the camera, left to right: Josh Brolin, Elisabeth Shue and Greg Grunberg) monitor the process of making Dr. Caine invisible.

Auteurs: The Great Maestros in Decline

The 2000s was the last era, in a very real sense, that the great horror maestros who cut their teeth in the cinema of the 1970s and 1980s contributed meaningful new work to the horror genre that they

had so influenced.

Wes Craven crafted a slasher sequel, *Scream 3* (2000) and a werewolf movie, *Cursed* (2005) that suffered from post-production tinkering, rewriting and reshoots. Neither film would rank near the top of a canon that includes *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), or *Scream* (1996). Two of Craven's classic horror efforts were remade in the aughts, *Last House* and *Hills*, and his best film of the decade was likely a non-horror effort, the thriller *Red Eye* (2005).

John Carpenter, maestro of *Halloween* (1978), *The Fog* (1981), *The Thing* (1982) and many more classics traveled a similarly uninspiring journey in the first decade of the 21st century. Both *Halloween* (2007) and *The Fog* (2005) were remade by others, and even *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) was remade as a straight-up, glossy action picture. Carpenter's only directing contribution of the decade was *John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars* (2001), a fascinating return to his Howard Hawks' western genre obsession, but a film that met the most savage reviews of his long and impressive career. He did not direct another feature film until 2010's *The Ward*.



Genre maestro John Carpenter made only one film in the 2000s, the critically derided—but fascinating—*Ghosts of Mars* (2001). Pictured here is Big Daddy Mars (Richard Cetrone), who has established dominion

over a human colony on the red planet.

Tobe Hooper had a career renaissance of sorts in the 2000s, though once more working in low-budget horror, his roots in the industry. His efforts, *Crocodile* (2000), *Mortuary* (2005) and *The Toolbox Murders* (2005) were weird, wild and not seen by many. At the very least, he seemed happy to continue creating genre films, and that same old corkscrew Hooper energy was on tap.

Of the classic 70s wild bunch, it was George A. Romero who had the greatest success in the 2000s. It had been some time since his last zombie film, *Day of the Dead* (1985), but the aughts gave him the opportunity to direct the three final installments of the saga, the mainstream *Land of the Dead* (2005), the found-footage *Diary of the Dead* (2008) and the vastly underrated coda, *Survival of the Dead* (2009). For some long-time fans and critics, it was wonderful to have Romero back, working on the franchise that had made his name in the industry. Others found much to complain about in the new films, including a reliance on CGI gore rather than practical effects.



George A. Romero, father of the living dead, pictured here on the set of 1985's *Day of the Dead*, had a career renaissance in the 2000s, directing no less than three new chapters of the living dead saga, including *Land of the Dead*.

the Dead (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2008) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009).

Sam Raimi also returned to the genre twice in the first decade of the 21st century, bookending it in fact with a gothic horror piece, *The Gift* (2000) and the manic, over-the-top *Drag Me to Hell* (2009).

As these maestros toiled, in their third or fourth decade of crafting horror films, new voices also rose in the aughts. The most controversial was Rob Zombie, who directed four films in the era. Two of those films came straight from his warped but fertile imagination, the *Chainsaw*-styled pastiche *House of 1000 Corpses* (2002) and its road-trip sequel, *The Devil's Rejects* (2005). These efforts, featuring redneck characters, colorful language and gore aplenty, generally met with favor from horror fans.

Zombie's other films of the decade, the remake of Carpenter's *Halloween* (2007) and its sequel, *Halloween 2* (2009), were lightning rods for controversy. In both films, Carpenter's spare, neo-classical approach was replaced by gory violence, white-trash-type characters, and a focus on Michael Myers' psychology, rather than his impenetrable nature as "The Shape."

Some fans appreciated the individuality of Zombie's film, especially in a franchise that had ended with ignominy and shame in *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002), while others could simply not stomach Zombie's cynical world view and gutter approach to the franchise. But love or hate the *Halloween* remakes, they certainly rank near the top of any *Halloween* spin-offs in terms of artistic vision. Those films are uniquely his.

Another brash voice rose to prominence in the 2000s. Eli Roth burst onto the horror scene with *Cabin Fever* (2003), but that film, with its homages to *The Evil Dead* and *The Last House on the Left*, and its quirky almost campy sequences, was nothing compared to what came next.

In 2005, Roth's *Hostel* debuted (right on the heels of *Saw* [2004]), and the idea of torture porn was cemented in the popular culture. *Hostel*, and the sequel, *Hostel II*, which Roth also directed, featured Americans in Slovakia being exploited as raw materials in a torture shop of extreme sadism and reach. These films were gut-wrenching, it was true, but many critics missed the fact that they were also suspenseful, imaginative, and steeped in the culture of the moment. Critics complained vociferously about Roth's focus on torture and violence, but America was waging its War on Terror and, at least implicitly, condoning torture at the same time. Roth's art was simply—and effectively—mirroring the larger global atmosphere.

Ti West was another up-and-comer at the end of the decade. Although his *Cabin Fever 2: Spring Fever* went through creative difficulties, his 2009 effort, *The House of the Devil* captured the imagination of the horror blogosphere with its 1980s touches, and slow-burn approach to the material. In the 2010s, West went even further, with new efforts such as *The Innkeepers* (2012), *You're Next* (2012), *V/H/S/* (2012) and *The Sacrament* (2013).

France gave the horror film Alexandre Aja in the 2000s, another auteur. He burst onto the scene with *High Tension* (2003), a frenetic effort that positioned the slasher and the final girl in the same physical body for the first time, perhaps, in the genre's history. Next, he directed the stunning, brutal and brilliant, at least in terms of War on Terror cultural criticism, remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* in 2006. Next came another remake, *Mirrors* (2008), which was not as well received as the previous two efforts.



Director Alexandre Aja (left) and scribe Gregory Levasseur on the set of *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006).

Even as *Zombie*, Roth, West, and Aja rose, it became apparent that the cinema of the 21st century was vastly different than that of the closing years of the 20th century. Aside from *Zombie*, there were few horror directors working, few heirs to Carpenter, Craven, Hooper, Romero, Raimi or Cronenberg, who proved that they could operate in a number of sub-genres (alien invasion, road trip gone awry, zombie, found footage, slasher, ghost story) and have audiences follow them for the ride.

The voice of the director was becoming less and less important in the new century, which meant that new auteurs were not coming out of Hollywood. Directors such as James Wan, or Darren Lynn-Bousman were known for the *Saw* films during the decade but did not, in the 2000s transfer that success to other horror films.

Why was this the case?

Horror films had become, in the new century, brand names. Remakes, J-Horror, and even new franchises such as *Final Destination*, *Wrong Turn* and *Saw*, were seen as on-going cash cows whose creativity lay in the brand; in the work of the producer overseeing multiple entries. Rather than being seen as the driving creative force of these enterprises, directors were becoming simply hired hands to take on the next entry.

But by the entry after that, they could be gone; replaced by another jobbing individual.

The Horror Blogosphere

One of the most fascinating and Web 2.0 trends involves “blogs” or web logs. These are online journals with daily or weekly entries. In the mid-2000s, blogs took off, and many new voices were added to the constellation of horror critics and aficionados.

The greatest virtue of blogging, perhaps, is that the format—instant mass publication—eliminates elitist gatekeeping from the process of writing about any chosen topic, including the horror film. In previous decades some gatekeepers at periodicals, or in publishing houses could prevent new and worthwhile authors from being read.

Blogger, which was launched in 1999, and Wordpress, which was launched in 2003, helped to change all that. For the first time, perhaps in history, the ranks of horror scholars could be filled by writers not belonging to one particular ethnicity, demographic, gender or background. Without gatekeepers to hold back artistry and creativity, women’s voices, gay voices, Gen X voices and others finally moved to the forefront of horror criticism, to the betterment of the genre as a whole. Appreciation for the horror film as a format, blog readers learned, is widespread, and features diverse writers, and diverse interests.

Accordingly, the 2000s gave rise to a number of worthwhile, skilled new voices in horror scholarship and criticism. By the late 2000s, these blogs were often daily stops for readers, including this author, who began his own blog in 2005, and which is still going as of this writing ... more than 11,000 posts later.

It would be impossible to name all the horror blogs this author frequented from probably 2006–2012, but they include JM Cozzoli’s *Zombo’s Closet of Horror*, Stacie Ponder’s *Final Girl*, Pax Romano’s *Billy Loves Stu*, and Brian Solomon’s *The Vault of Horror*.

On a good day, an in-trepid horror movie fan could read engaging and provocative new thoughts about the horror movie format at all of these blogs, and at *Day of the Woman*, *Groovy Age of Horror*, *Kindertrauma*, *Theofantastique*, *The Drunken Severed Head*, and more. Many of these fantastic bloggers banded together in the latter part of the decade to form a kind of “Avengers” team of horror bloggers called *The League of Tana Tea Drinkers*.

And, at least for a while, horror bloggers could also contribute their own stories and other stories on an aggregation site called *Horror Blips*, that was popular in the age of *Twilight*, before going silent in 2010.

Predictably, some established voices and periodicals complained about blogs and the takeover of writing on movies by “amateurs.” They didn’t like that gatekeeping had been removed. Yet in the age of J-

Horror, Remakes and zombies, the horror film community grew more multi-faceted and multi-cultural, it established ties throughout all corners of the net, it shared viewpoints and philosophies on film, and pushed the boundaries of understanding about the genre and what it accomplishes.

Films long left unexamined were exhumed, often with great passion, and explored as having new, unexcavated meanings. For this author, certainly, the blogs mentioned here, and others too, represent a golden age of horror film scholarship and appreciation in American society. The worst part of researching this book was discovering how many blogs had become dead links or stopped posting by 2020.

It is true, of course, that not all blogs are created equal (just the way all movies are not created equal). But the bad blogs, with the bad writers, simply never gained steam, and natural selection took over. They went extinct in short order. Meanwhile, the good blogs and good writers grew audiences that, in the heyday of 2005–2012, had readerships in the millions. From 2012 on, however, the great blogger awakening began to recede. Most bloggers are not paid for their work. They thrive, instead, on their own enthusiasm for their subject. But the grind of having to create quality work, every day, to maintain an audience, simply became too much in some cases, given the scant financial rewards.

And, the YouTubers were in the offing, with some bloggers heading to that format to continue the appreciation of horror as TV stars of a sort.

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59. Todd K. Platts and Mathias Clasen, *Frames Cinema Journal*: “Scary Business: Horror at the North American Box Office, 2006–2016,” 2017.
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III

The Films

(by Year of Release)

Approximately 300 films are surveyed in the following section of Horror Films of the 2000s. They are dated by the time of their release (either theatrically, or direct-to-video)

TIMELINE: 2000

January 1: The largest corporate merger in U.S. history, up until this time, between America Online and Time Warner, occurs.

February 13: Following the death of Charles Schulz, the last *Peanuts* comic strip is published.

March 26: Vladimir Putin is elected President of Russia.

May 3: The first episode of the competitive reality series *Survivor* airs.

June 28: Cuban émigré Elián González returns to Cuba with his father.

August 12: The Russian submarine *Kursk* sinks in the Barents Sea, and all 118 men aboard die.

August 24: Nintendo Game Cube is released.

September 12: In the lead-up to the Presidential election, George W. Bush's advisor, Karl Rove, is accused of making a TV commercial that uses subliminal imagery, highlighting the word "RATS" when discussing a Democratic prescription drug plan.

October 3: The first Presidential debate between Republican nominee George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore, in Boston, is broadcast nationally. Gore wins on substance, but loses on attitude, as he harrumphs, sighs and eye-rolls his way through the event.

October 12: The U.S. Naval Destroyer U.S.S. *Cole* is attacked by suicide members from the radical Islamic group, Al Qaeda, in Yemen. Seventeen crewmembers aboard are killed.

November 7: In the Presidential election, George W. Bush, a Republican, and Al Gore, a

Democrat, are locked in a stalemate when Bush appears to win Florida by 537 votes out of 6 million cast. The governor of Florida is George W.'s brother, Jeb Bush, and Katherine Harris, the Secretary of State of Florida, who certifies the results of the election, works for the Bush Campaign. The disputed election outcome follows after networks have already called Florida for Gore. The first network to call Florida for Bush is the right-leaning Fox, and the call comes from a Bush cousin. Meanwhile, First Lady Hillary Clinton wins in her race to become a Senator for New York.

November 16: President Bill Clinton visits Vietnam, the first visit by a U.S. President since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.

November 22: The Brooks Brothers Riot occurs in Miami-Dade County, Florida, as Republican operatives (including Tom DeLay and Donald Trump associate Roger Stone) attempt to halt by force a legal presidential recount that could give Al Gore the presidency.

December 12: The United States Supreme Court, in its decision *Bush v. Gore*, terminates the Florida recount of Presidential ballots, effectively handing the office of the President to George W. Bush. He is the first candidate since Grover Cleveland to win the electoral college, but not the popular vote. Al Gore ultimately wins the popular vote by nearly 550,000 votes. Two justices appointed by George H. W. Bush, Clarence Thomas and David Souter, vote to install his son, George W., as Commander in Chief.

American Psycho ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"A suffocated dislocation of the book's greatest hits, the film too rarely stretches out with a penetrating thought of its own. Events are scrambled, last names changed, and the most unsavory executions left well enough alone solely in the name of drawing out what little narrative Ellis concocted..."—Wesley Morris, *The San Francisco Examiner*: "Psycho' Needs Treatment," April 14, 2000.

"...the movie does work so well as a film and manages to be a competent distillation of its source. The film feels exactly like the book, lifted verbatim, and the scenes Ellis created on paper work wonderfully on celluloid—the brittle but banal dinner dialogue, a moment when one of Bateman's would-be male victims completely disarms him by making a pass at him, Bateman's futile rants at a Chinese laundry. Events may occur out of order or telescoped and combined, sliced and diced like our anti-hero's victims, but they're there and they work. Granted, most of the gore and ninety per cent of the obsession with detail have been left behind, but that's probably just as well."—Jon Bastian, *Film Monthly.com*, April 17, 2000.

"Who is Patrick Bateman? Not even Patrick (Christian Bale) himself knows. Based on Bret Easton Ellis' reviled and deified book of the same name, Mary Harron's retelling of a psychotic capitalist fever dream has come to define our notions of toxic masculinity and its insidious ties to our way of life. Patrick Bateman may be one of the most loathsome characters in literature and film. Dedicated to little else except his status, skin care and murder of those who he sees as disposable, the film stays closely with him encouraging the audience to stay within his mindset for the runtime of the film. In the now iconic business card scene where Patrick and his counterparts compare fonts, paper thickness and status illustrating the banality of the world they've willfully created for themselves with Patrick's only outlet being brutality and murder, the film lets the audience in on the joke which Patrick himself never gets.

The film presents the events with an even hand, maintaining Patrick's viewpoint but also refusing to glorify his acts, they are presented as meaningless, in a vacuum of consequence which in turn creates a form of existential suffering from which Patrick cannot break free or effect change. In Harron's film, Bateman is meaningless but also holds a terrifying amount of status in the world. He becomes boogeyman for the new

millennium, borne out of the 1980s that still casts a cultural shadow as one of the inspirations for the character was Donald Trump, a buffoon whose desire for respect and status comes at a deadly price to the world around him.”—Alexandra West, author of *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Christian Bale (Patrick Bateman); Justin Theroux (Timothy Bryce); Josh Lucas (Craig McDermott); Bill Sage (David Van Patten); Chloe Sevigny (Jean); Reese Witherspoon (Evelyn Williams); Samantha Mathis (Courtney Rawlinson); Matt Ross (Luis Carruther); Jared Leto (Paul Allen); Willem Dafoe (Donald Kimball); Cara Seymour (Christie); Guinevere Turner (Elizabeth); Monika Meier (Daisy); Reg. E Cathey (Homeless Man).

CREW: Lions Gate Films, American Psycho Productions, Muse Productions, PPS Films, Universal Pictures, Quadra Entertainment present an Edward R. Pressman film, *American Psycho*. Casting: Kerry Barden, Suzanne Crowley, Billy Hopkins. Production Designer: Gideon Ponte. Costume Designer: Isis Mussenden. Special Effects: Kavanaugh Special effects, Steve Johnson XFX. Music: John Cale. Director of Photography: Andrzej Sekula. Film Editor: Andrew Marcus. Producers: Christian Halsey Solomon, Chris Hanley. Executive Producers: Joseph Drake, Michael Paseornek, Jeff Sackman. Based on the novel by: Bret Easton Ellis. Written by: Mary Harron and Guinevere Turner. Directed by: Mary Harron. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Manhattan in the 1980s, Patrick Bateman (Bale), vice-president at Pierce and Pierce, lives a double life. By day, he is a high-powered businessman trying to survive a world of intense competition from a dozen white males just like him (though possessing possibly superior-quality business cards). By night, however, Patrick is a deranged serial killer, luring women back to his expensive apartment for debauched interludes of sex and homicide. Soon, a detective, Kimball (Dafoe), investigates the crimes and finds his way to Bateman. As the noose tightens, Bateman’s grip on sanity grows more tenuous.

COMMENTARY: Can a society itself be mentally ill? Can its conflicting values cause, actually, a culture to become schizophrenic? And, if a culture is schizophrenic, what of its people? These are just a few of the provocative question raised by *American Psycho*, one of the first truly great American horror films of the 2000s and an adaptation of the controversial novel by Bret Easton Ellis.

It will come as no surprise to those who have viewed the film that it is a deeply layered social critique of American values in the 1980s. This was the era of “*don’t worry, be happy*” magical thinking in terms of voodoo economics and spending. It was an era when physical beauty (think Olivia Newton John and aerobics) was prized almost as highly as affluence, and the growing AIDS epidemic was not even worth a mention by the Reagan Administration for years. It was the era of “*greed is good*” conspicuous consumption and cuts to social programs for the homeless, the mentally ill, and others. The 1980s gave rise to the yuppie, young upwardly mobile professionals who cared mainly about being rich, and not about the connective links of American communi-ties.

But, what does it do to a person to live in this yuppie paradise when the greatest value is having superior business cards to one’s nemesis? When superficial values such as where you are seen having lunch, is the highest ideal?

Hey, is that Donald Trump’s car?



A bloodied Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) picks up his weapon of choice, a chainsaw, in Mary Harron's adaptation of the controversial novel *American Psycho* (2000).

In the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter was widely mocked and disparaged for his so-called “*crisis of confidence*” speech. There, the plainspoken, humble farmer from Georgia spoke honestly with the country about what he saw coming over the hill in the 1980s. He warned: “*In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.*”



Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) has an axe to grind in *American Psycho* (2000).

Patrick Bateman, a symptom of the sickness of America's soul in the 1980s, is a person who has no meaning, and no consequences in his life. Bateman commits murder and is hardly noticed. He commits moral atrocities, and is not punished, nor called to task for his actions. He lives in a world immune from accountability, and therefore, in the words of President Carter, he dwells in a world with no meaning. Bateman possesses wealth, power, status, all the things that the Reagan Revolution told Americans to prize, and yet he is hollow inside. Once you take away his things—the surface world—there is nothing there. Bateman is not proud of his work, his family, his community, and he does not appear to have faith. In the film, he kills a homeless person in cold blood, for example. When Bateman stabs his victim, he states, importantly, *"I don't have anything in common with you."* Again, this dialogue goes right back to the speech for which Carter was so excessively mocked, and which the nation ignored before doubling down on Reaganomics and Yuppie-ism. Bateman is not a member of a close-knit community. For him, community is not about his actions, but about "fitting in," conformity. It means he can get lunch reservations at the hottest restaurants in the city.

In Bateman's lucid moments, he is aware of his intrinsic emptiness, his shallow superficiality. *"I am simply not there,"* he notes at one point. At another juncture, he suggests *"there is no real me."* The movie makes the point of his musings plain. Surface values such as wealth, status and appearance have replaced everything else, yet have failed to fill the void inside. *American Psycho* becomes such a scathing critique because Bateman fits in so well with society that he is not recognized for the monster that he is. In fact, he is constantly mistaken for others in his same social circle. The inference is that they are all like him: empty inside and made so by the sheer superficiality of the culture. Bateman's privileged education, demographics and position mean that punishment—and therefore meaning in his life—will always elude him. The film is structured as his "confession" of his crimes, but at the end, even he realizes that the confession means *"nothing,"* like everything else in his life.

Reagan is indeed seen in the film, and as noted, *"he presents himself as this harmless old codger,"* but *"inside"* is something different. Again, one cannot separate the movie from the culture, from the politics that inform it. Before he was President, of course, Ronald Reagan was a Hollywood actor, and therefore he, like Bateman in the film, understood how to play a role; even if the role conflicted mightily with reality. For example, Reagan was a "family values" President, yet he was divorced from his first wife, Jane Wyman. He was a Christian leader who didn't attend Church regularly. Reagan also criticized the growth of the Federal Government in his first inauguration but actually grew the Federal government during his time in office (by some 2.8 million employees). Reagan claimed he was for cutting taxes, yet in 1986 oversaw the largest tax increase, the Tax Reform Act, in history up to that point. When Reagan left the presidency, the rich were richer but there were more than 35 million Americans living in poverty. His policies in office left behind a staggering 2.7 trillion dollars in the national debt, even though Reagan was a self-proclaimed fiscal conservative.

The illusions he sold, and which America bought (and still buys, at least partially, to this day), were in conflict. That conflict *"trickles down"* in *American Psycho* as Bateman appears to be one thing, an upstanding, virtue signaling promoter of *"general social concerns,"* Yet in reality he is a porn-consuming, chainsaw-wielding maniac.

American Psycho suggests that Patrick Bateman is peculiar, indeed to this country, and the corrupt decade that spawned him. Bale allegedly modeled his performance on Tom Cruise, a movie star who came to represent, through films like *Risky Business* (1983) and *Top Gun* (1986), American masculinity during the Reagan Era. And the film's soundtrack is punctuated by Phil Collins, Huey Lewis and the News, and compositions such as Robert Palmer's "Simply Irresistible." That last composition features a line about *"what is permissible"* and a love that compromises *"principle."* Again, this material is perfect 1980s fodder for a film that is all about pushing the boundaries of the permissible and shedding principle. This is seen in Bateman's Wall Street job too. *"Mergers and acquisitions"* is just a step away from *"murders and executions,"* the film observes.

In a horror-centric way, *American Psycho* is all about a society that promotes schizophrenia; that promotes the illusion of one thing (propriety) but a different reality (avarice), underneath. What happens when people accept the illusion sold by their government for so long? When they come to care

only about themselves and their wealth, power and status? What happens to those people?

American Psycho asks those questions at the start of the 21st century. It suggests that Reagan's America still reigns, to the detriment of the country and its denizens, and that Carter's revenge, in some weird way, is the psychosis of the masses. Like Bateman, many are aware that life only has meaning with accountability. Bateman is Gordon Gekko or Michael Millken, but with a difference. He is aware, deep down, that if the party never ends, it's not really a party. His constant "winning" is actually losing, because so long as he wins, nothing means anything.

American Psycho is funny, insightful and at times scary. The first famous serial killer of the 21st century is, one must notice, a quipping one, like Freddy Krueger, but also a beautiful, vainglorious one who struggles with a conscience. Patrick Bateman may not appear to possess a conscience, but he wants to possess a conscience. He has the inkling that having one is perhaps the only thing that could grant his life meaning. Despite the jokes and quips, this makes him a particularly human monster. And the milieu in which he works—of horror movies like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and pop culture references (to *Les Misérables*, *The Cosby Show*, etc.) make him very, very American.

Bateman can't quite swallow the Kool-Aid. He can't quite not worry and be happy. A man like him wants to have everything, but finds that the one commodity he can't buy, or cheat his way into, is morality.

Battle Royale * * * *

Critical Reception

"It sounds like comic-book stuff but played out relentlessly over two hours the concept of high school students fighting to the death has a nightmare logic that's all the more oppressive for its glib tongue-in-cheek presentation. The use of *The Blue Danube* at one point may be a homage to Stanley Kubrick, whose more disreputable side was clearly an important influence: with its perfunctory near-future setting, distancing zooms, and regular updates on the body count, the film deliberately conflates the psychopathic rules imposed on the characters with the pulp cruelty of its own formal system."—Jake Wilson, *The Urban Cinefile* (Retrieved July 28, 2020).

"With more than 40 contestants in the deadly game, this is a heart-stopping action film, teaching us the worthy lessons of discipline, teamwork, and determination, but wrapping them up in a deliberately provocative, shockingly violent package. With children killing each other, this is one foreign language film which is unlikely to secure a Hollywood remake." Jason Corner, *BBCI*, September 13, 2001.

"I didn't discover this Japanese gem until after the first *Hunger Games* film was released, and boy, it's like comparing elementary school to a college degree. Brutal and hilarious, *Battle Royale* captures the ugliness of humanity where *Hunger Games* merely cartoonizes it."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Tsuya Fujiwara (Shuya); Aki Maeda (Noriko); Taro Yamamoto (Shogo Kawada); Bito Takeshi (Kitano-sensei); Chiaki Kuriyama (Takako); Sosuke Takaoaka (Hiroki); Takashi Tsukamoto (Shinji); Yukihiro Kotani (Yoshitoki); Eri Ishikawa (Yukie); Sayaka Kamiya (Satomi); Takayo Mimura (Kayoko); Aki Inoue (Fumiyo); Ren Matsuzawa (Keita); Hirohito Honda (Kazushi); Ryou Nitta (Kyoichi); Sayaka Ikeda (Megumi); Anna Nagata (Hirono).

CREW: Anchor Bay Films, GAGA, AM Associates, Toei Company, Fukasaku-gumi, Kobi Co, MF Pictures, WOWOW, and Nippon Shuppan Hanbai K.K. present *Battle Royale*. Production Designer: Kyoko Heya. Special Effects: Malin Post, Nippon Eizo Creative, Toei Labo Tech. Music: Masamichi Amano. Director of Photography: Katsumi Yanagijima. Film Editor: Hirohide Abe. Producers: Kenta Fukasaku, Kinji Fukasaku, Kimio Katoaka, Chie Kobayashi, Toshio Nabeshima, Masumi Okada. Based on the novel by: Koushon Takami. Written by: Kenta Fukasaku. Directed by: Kinji Fukasaku. M.P.A.A. Rating: N.R. Running time: 114 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At the start of the new Millennium, Japan suffers an economic depression. There is 15 percent unemployment, ten million people out of work, and rising violence, especially among the country's youth. 800,000 students boycott the Millennium Education Reform Act, which has been crafted to address the uptick in crime. Each year, under the new law, troublesome students in a random high school class are taken from their school and transported to an inhospitable island. There, they fight to the death, until only one student remains. This year, class 3-B has been chosen, according to game-master Kitano. Among those abducted for the fight are the gentle Noriko (Maeda) and a young man, Shuya Nanahara (Fujiwara) whose father recently committed suicide, all but leaving him alone in the world. In the course of the game, Shuya seeks to protect Noriko, and also team-up with a former game-winner, the mysterious Kawada (Yamamoto), to survive the extreme violence. But alliances are neither encouraged nor allowed here, which means that everyone is in constant danger, even from those they trust most.

COMMENTARY: *Battle Royale*, based on the novel by Koushun Takami, stems from a specific Japanese cultural and historical context. From 1996 to 1999, juvenile crime in Japan spiked. According to *The New York Times*, the fastest growing criminal category in Japan at that time involved minors. In one decade, the number of violent crimes committed by juveniles doubled. The stories of these turn-of-the-century youth crimes were shocking to the nation and remain so to this day. In 1997, in Kobe, for example, a 14-year-old boy decapitated an eleven-year-old boy and clubbed a ten-year-old girl to death. In Yamaguchi during the same span, a minor strangled and killed a mother and baby. The reasons behind this uptick in youth crime are numerous. Some scholars point to a weak national economy, which offered too few jobs to young people finishing school and created Japan's so-called "lost decade." Others cast a light on the social aspects of the culture, like the drop-out rate, and the push (via "juku" or "cram" school) to compete for academic/economic success. Such intense competition, which sometimes saw students attending school programs from early morning to nearly midnight, kept children from being at home with their families. The same article observes that, in particular, children were cut from spending time with their fathers. To put a fine point on it, economic success was prized more highly than family time in the Japanese culture during this period (the same period, incidentally, that gave rise to *Ringu* [1998]). A whole generation, as a result, lost faith in the future, and their place in it.

In response to the youth crime wave, new draconian laws were proposed. For example, it was suggested that there would be an increased detention period for juvenile offenders, and that the age in which they could appear in criminal court would be lowered from sixteen to fourteen. All of this historical context is necessary back-story to make sense of Kinji Fukasaku's ultra-violent film, *Battle Royale*.

The film depicts a Japanese society in which children are out-of-control and violent, but where, ultimately, the adults are responsible for the worsening situation because of the laws they have imposed. In the fictional Japan of the film, specifically, a BR (*Battle Royale*) law, or Millennium Education Reform Act, has been enacted. It states that troublesome students can be removed from their school rooms and remanded to a remote island, where they will kill each other in a contest over a three-day span. Only the last survivor will return home. Explosive collars make certain that this is the case, as do rotating "danger zones." The lord of this deadly game is a teacher Kitano (Takeshi Kitano) who was once stabbed by a wayward student, and now, out of spite and hatred, sentences students to untimely, monstrous deaths.

Battle Royale follows one classroom of kids as they are taken to the island and must compete there, against one another, to survive. The action on that island is brutal, monstrous, and bracing. However, as in many films of this type (see: *The Last House on the Left* [1972]) there is a pro-social meaning underlining the violence. In this case, the audience is asked to reckon with the savagery and the barbarism of the students on the island, much as newspaper readers in 1997 would encounter the savagery of the crimes tallied above. But then, the film goes a step further, and asks audiences to reckon

with the idea that the cure, a crueler, less sympathetic and more violent society, is worse than the disease itself. Thus, *Battle Royale* reminds the viewer that youngsters may be violent if they lose hope or are abandoned by society and family. But the real monster here is that society which made this world for them: one of no hope, no escape, and no love. It is a society whose primary lesson is be the best, or you have failed. Kill or be killed. And take no prisoners in your quest to be number one.

Battle Royale (2000) succeeds on several thematic and literal fronts. In the first case, the film is a blistering action film, one totally lacking in political correctness or decorum. Here, school age kids commit murder and die bloodily. Innocent youngsters are hunted and killed without remorse. Some beg for their lives and are killed anyway. Again, there's a reason for this level of unadulterated violence: it rocks the audience back on its heels and shocks its sensibilities. The violence must be edgy, must push the envelope, or the movie's point doesn't transmit. In America, this approach likely would not fly. Again, however, there is a thematic point. The violence, and the blunt, indecorous nature of the violence shocks the system. These are little more than children. But they are drenched in blood, surrounded by death. The brutal, taboo-shattering nature of the violence makes viewers wonder, how is this possible? How has society gone so wrong that the youngest among us think that it is acceptable to act so violently, and without thought?

Setting aside the in-your-face aspect of the violence it often depicts, *Battle Royale* is brilliantly staged and filmed, with the violence being timed and shot for the most dramatic and visceral impact. At times the violence is so over-the-top and intense that one may be tempted to let out a nervous giggle. It's discomfiting. And that nervous giggle, in a sense, is the key to the film's satirical argument. Specifically, *Battle Royale* operates, at least on one level, as a metaphor for the pressure-cooker that students face in Japan, with juku and relentless study. They must metaphorically slay their classmates every day to achieve success academically and economically, and this means beating everyone, even their friends. No alliances will get them to first place in school, or to the best job academically. They must show no mercy, no quarter in their rise to the top. Gazing at *Battle Royale*'s violence, it can be interpreted as a literal representation of Japan's academic regime. Here there is no prize for second place. Yet thousands of students compete for slot one. Fellow students aren't friends. They are enemies to be dispatched. Even the explosive collar seems to be a comment on the rigorous academic competition of students in Japan's schools. They may not slay others successfully, but there's always a risk their heads will blow-off from all the pressure of cramming.

Much more intriguing, however, is the serious rather than satirical social commentary laced throughout the film's text. In *Battle Royale*, the audience encounters a society that fears youth violence, so what does it do? It *rewards* successful violence. It *breeds* violence. The problem, as noted above, is an outbreak of juvenile crime, but the Millennium Education Reform Act only ensures that students become more adept, more skilled in their use of violence. Consider this fact: any class can be picked, any year. It becomes incumbent, then, upon a student to prepare—*cram*?—to survive in the event his or her class is picked. After a few years, students will be cramming not in academic subjects, but in the art of dealing death. The law only encourages one to become a cold-hearted killer. The purpose of rehabilitation or reform in Japan is "*shokuzaiikan*," the insight to view your crimes in a new, empathetic light. You must look at who you hurt, and why you hurt them, for example. What was the impact, on a human level? On a personal one? On a societal level? The *Battle Royale* in the film doesn't achieve that end of self-awareness or reckoning even in the slightest. Instead, it encourages bloodthirstiness, a kill-or-be-killed attitude that puts self-survival and success above all else. The film's "bad father" figure, Kitano embraces a system which creates additional student assassins, much like the one who stabbed him in the first place. Indeed, the direct result of the battle/contest featured in the film is that he is assassinated by students who, before the games, would not have come after him. They would not have imagined hurting, let alone murdering him.

On a broad scale, then, what *Battle Royale* concerns is the idea that tougher laws—heartless laws—can never build better people, only meaner, more cut-throat ones. The benefit of criminal

reform is to make the criminal pay his or her debt to society, and then make him or her better able to return and function normally in society. At the end of *Battle Royale*, by contrast, two students become criminals. Outside the game experience they would never have been criminals. The film last depicts these protagonists in a major city, on the run, trusting no one but each other. In this case, clearly, the draconian law has backfired. It has made the law-abiding youth of Japan unable to trust, unable to join society. They have cashed in their chips and signed out of the culture. Permanently. Indeed, a key line in the film states: “*I’ve never really trusted adults,*” and that’s because, in the film’s fictitious world, the adults have responded to a problem not by making it better, not by examining its root causes, but by making it infinitely worse. The laws to crack down on teen violence have only made teen violence necessary.

There is also, unusually, hope in the film. Shuya remains an open, hopeful character, despite all the tragedy that life has thrown at him. He knows he will be punished for making allies with other students, and yet he seeks and honors those alliances because he also knows it is the right thing to do. Inside of isolating himself from others, he responds by reaching out. That is a real sign of strength. It isn’t clear that *The Hunger Games* (2012) is a straight-up rip-off of *Battle Royale*. But that the popular American franchise appropriates the Japanese story’s ending, which is that the “*stupid system*” is defeated, specifically, by disobeying rules, by building alliances. That is a constant in both films, but *Battle Royale* handles the concept better.

Another line in the film also resonates: “*If you hate someone, then you have to live with the consequences.*” The film’s Millennium Education Reform Act arose from fear and hate, and then built a larger culture of fear and hate, one that would swallow the next generation of Japanese youngsters. To quote a survivor of the battle to the death and to describe *Battle Royale* as a work of art, “*it’s beautiful ... even though it’s where everybody died.*”

Bless the Child ★ 1/2

Critical Reception

“Though sporting a fairly intelligent and sophisticated plot by Hollywood standards, the film is not without its flaws and internal contradictions. Why, for example, do angels keep popping up at opportune moments to help out [Jimmy Smits] and [Kim Basinger], but aren’t around at other vital points? For her part, Basinger does a credible job as the overprotective adoptive mother. But Smits seems uncharacteristically wooden as the FBI agent. Sparks that are supposed to fly between Smits and Basinger fizzle out before catching fire.”—Rusty Marks, *The Charleston Gazette*, August 2000, page 2D.

“Basinger brings a wacky earnestness to her role—she really appears to believe in this hokum—but it’s Sewell who steals the movie and upholds the tradition of British actors hamming it up in villain roles (Gary Oldman, Anthony Hopkins, Tim Roth). Sewell doesn’t do so much—just zap us with his smug smile—but it’s enough to save *Bless the Child* from mediocrity.”—Edward Guthmann, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, August 11, 2000.

“*Bless the Child* ... has nothing new to offer. Its innovations consist in a few computer-generated winged demons, a trio of astral angels resembling nothing so much as flying jellyfish, and a few inanely smiling bystanders, cadged from *Touched by an Angel*, who chip in to save Maggie at opportune moments. Otherwise, it’s every hoary cliché of 1975, right down to the embarrassment of Ian Holm, as the renegade priest, shouting such lines as ‘All of us are chosen by God—all of us can stand against the darkness!’”—Rand Richards Cooper, *Commonweal*: “Exorcisms,” September 22, 2000, pages 17–18.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kim Basinger (Maggie O’Connor); Jimmy Smits (John Travis); Holliston Coleman (Cody); Rufus Sewell (Eric Stark); Angela Bettis (Jenna); Christina Ricci (Cheri); Michael Gaston (Det. Bugatti); Ian Holm (The Reverend Grissom); Lumi Cavazos (Sister Rosa); Eugene Lipinski (Stuart); Anne Betancourt (Maria).

CREW: Paramount Pictures, Icon Entertainment International, Munich Film Partners and Co., and BTC Productions present *Bless the Child*. Casting: Deborah Aquila, Sarah Halley Finn. Production Designer: Carol Spier. Costume Designer: Denise Cronenberg. Music: Christopher Young. Special Effects: Warren Appleby, Vale Sykes, Captive Audience Productions, Cannon Creations, Manex Visual Effects. Director of Photography: Peter Menzies, Jr. Film Editor: Alan Heim. Producers: Mace Neufeld. Executive Producers: Bruce Davey, Lis Kern, Robert Rehme. Written by: Tom Rickman, Clifford Green, Ellen Green. Based on the novel by: Cathy Cash Spellman. Directed by: Chuck Russell. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At Christmastime, a star not seen since Jesus’s days in Bethlehem lights the sky and marks the birth of a child named Cody. In Manhattan years later, a woman, Maggie (Basinger), fights to maintain custody of Cody (Coleman), who is actually the offspring of her undependable, drug-addicted sister, Jenna (Bettis). Jenna has taken up with the leader of a cult called New Dawn, Eric Stark (Sewell), who believes that Cody, an autistic child, possesses supernatural powers. Stark wishes to control Cody’s powers, and use her to serve the Devil. Maggie attempts to get back Cody from this sinister leader, and enlists the help of an FBI agent, Travis (Smits) to do so. In protecting Cody, however, Maggie must also fight Satan himself.

COMMENTARY: A half-baked religious horror film, *Bless the Child*—along with other early 2000s “devil child” movies like *The Calling* and *Lost Souls*—feel a lot like a bad hangover from the late 1990s. That was the era of such fin-de-siècle, turn-of-the-millennium outings such as *The Devil’s Advocate* (1997), *Stigmata* (1999) and *End of Days* (1999). Alas, *Bless the Child* is simultaneously preachy and silly.

and Academy Award winning actress Kim Basinger is hilariously awful as the lead character, both self-righteous and over-the-top, in the role of an adopted mother out to protect a child at all costs from the Forces of Evil.



Evil walks among us in *Bless the Child*. Here are two views of Cody (Holliston Coleman) and Maggie (Kim Basinger) from this spiritual horror film.

The 2000s saw the character of “*the protective mother*” take center stage in a number of horror films, from *Bless the Child* (2000) to *Forgotten* (2004). These paeans to motherhood often featured “A” list actors, like Basinger or Julianne Moore, battling dark forces and sacrificing everything to prove the primacy of maternal love. In addition to putting Mom on a pedestal, *Bless the Child* serves as a not-very-well-debated conservative critique of modern religions, and thus a re-assertion of traditional Christian belief. For example, Sewell’s Eric Stark is depicted not as a Holy Man, but as the leader of a cult, New Dawn, which preys on drug addicts such as Jenna and Cheri. He leads his flock not to God, however, but straight to the Devil. Not a Holy Man, he is actually a Straw Man, a vessel for the filmmakers to pour out their distaste for non-Christian belief systems.

By contrast, Maggie is depicted as a strong, devout Catholic, who sends Cody to a Catholic “special needs” school which is able to treat and nurture the child through her autism. Simply by clutching a rosary, Cody is actually healed, temporarily, of her autism. Maggie, Cody’s grandma in the novel by Spellman also believes, chapter and verse, Christian dogma, and through her faith is dedicated to the possibility that someone of a different faith isn’t merely different, but actually evil, actually Lucifer’s servant. Alas, Eric Stark is aided and abetted in his evil ways by a modern society, according to the film that believes “*the concept of evil is politically incorrect.*” In other words, *Bless the Child* asserts that only Christians know the way to righteousness, and a corrupt secular society, in its attempt to tolerate multi-culturalism and diversity, has actually lent power to Evil.

Unpack the subtext here, and *Bless the Child* also irresponsibly advocates that prayer and faith can heal biological, medical conditions such as autism. Furthermore, it proposes that multi-culturalism, diversity and tolerance of such are actually avenues for Satan to lead one astray from the true path of Christianity. New Age religions and their self-realization seminars (replete with mottos like: “*Do what you will. Will what you do...*”) are Satanic honey traps for the self-deluded. Meanwhile, Maggie is aided by humble guardian angels, who conveniently confirm her belief in her own faith and righteousness. Maggie even ascends, by film’s end to Christ-like stature as she sacrifices her life for Cody and is resurrected by the Spirit for her devotion to the One True Way.



Two more views from *Bless the Child*. Rufus Sewell (left) plays the devilish Eric Stark. Holliston Coleman (right) plays Stark's quarry, Cody.

In short, this is all tripe designed to play to a very specific corn-fed American demographic. Compare *Bless the Child* to a beautiful religious horror film such as *The Exorcist* (1973), which contemplates in cerebral fashion, the nature of the Universe, and God and the Devil. Or to a provocative one, like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) which critiques man and the secular world in a way that doesn't feel preachy, or unintentionally hilarious. One can even compare *Bless the Child* to a legitimately scary religious horror film, like *The Omen* (1977). That film features a relentless drive and inevitable sweep. More importantly, it steepens its spiritual horror in prophecy and Scripture, so that the core ideas carry at least a veneer of legitimacy. In all cases, *Bless the Child* feels hilariously overwrought and paranoid by comparison, wearing its self-righteous (but also elitist) heart on its sleeve throughout its running time.

Disclaimer: I am not aligned with the devil for vehemently disliking this movie and its simplistic, parochial view of modernity. But here's the thing: those who like and agree with the film's narrow viewpoint and philosophy about which of man's belief systems is preferred by the Almighty would no doubt argue I am part of the Satanic conspiracy, either intentionally, or as an unwitting dupe.

Well, bless their hearts. But God spare us from more movies like this one.

Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2 * *

Critical Reception

"More jerky camera, in-your-face home movie footage? Thankfully, no. Instead—as stylishly woven here by experienced documentary director Jo Berlinger—we have a genuinely unsettling shock-horror which first acknowledges the original film, and then wickedly turns it on its once shaky head.... A combination of slasher film and nifty probe into the Blair Witch phenomenon, it all adds up to genuine suspense."—Quentin Falk, *Sunday Mirror*, October 2000, page 53.

"I know I'm deep in the minority here, but this film is not entirely without merit. Following *The Blair Witch Project* was already going to doom nearly any writer/director to failure—the original film had no real plotline, and studios generally aren't comfortable with that, so *Book of Shadows* was always going to be different from its predecessor, primarily because plotting would play a major role in this sequel. What it did with that plot, however, and the way it approached timelines, where characters remember one reality while video footage remembers another, is certainly an interesting approach in the early days of the ubiquitous multimedia that we would someday come to know as reality TV. When you compare this film to something like *Halloween: Resurrection* whose much more callous use of multi-cameras in a staged environment cheapened an already troubled film, *Book of Shadows* took itself very seriously and as a result has a certain purity to it. Rumors have always persisted that there was a great deal of studio meddling with the original cut of this film, and its poor box-office performance will all but guarantee we'll never see anything like a director's cut.

This film is in one way similar to films like *Halloween III: Season of the Witch*—beware of not following in your predecessor's footsteps. The fatal flaw of *Book of Shadows*, however, was in attempting to provide some sort of intent for the Blair Witch—let's make everybody crazy—that's not something the first film really supported (even if the end result would be the same). Horror films nearly always stumble when they try to explain—and this film is no exception. It was a well-made but mistaken attempt to make some more money on one of those 'lightning in a bottle' successes by making a standard movie—but it could have been much, much worse. Would the film have been any better as a found footage (well, raw footage like the original)? Probably not, because we were already in on the joke. But at least there were some interesting moments in the attempt at doing something a little different."—William Latham, author, *Mary's Monster and Eternity Unbound*.

"Few could have predicted the runaway success of Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) which saw out the final moments of the twentieth century with a trio of student filmmakers who disappear in the woods in Maryland in search of truths behind the legend of the Blair Witch. The film would gross \$248 million worldwide on a budget of \$60,000. Artisan Entertainment who released the film were keen to see further returns on what they felt had franchise potential and rushed to market with one of the strangest sequels ever committed to film, *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* which was released just over a year after the original.

The film, as Hollywood lore will tell you, was the brainchild of director Joe Berlinger and co-writer Dick Beebe who conceived of a plot that blended the mass media hysteria around the original film with an extension of the mythology built through the original film as well as its accompanying texts (notably the made-for-TV fictional special *The Curse of the Blair Witch*).



Two images from *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000), the sequel to the found footage hit *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Top: Jeff (Jeff Donovan, left), explores the ruins where Heather Donohue's footage was found with Erica (Erica Leerh-sen). Bottom: the team investigating the Blair Witch makes a frightening discovery (left to right: Erica Leerhsen, Stephen Barker Turner, Tristen Skyler and Jeff Donovan).

The trouble begins when Burkittsville resident Jeff (Jeffery Donovan) creates his own tour called the Blair Witch Hunt. The film follows its inaugural and ill-fated trip into the Black Hills Forrest to retrace the steps of the Witch and her victims. The tour group consists of Erica (Erica Leerhsen), a wiccan; Kim (Kim Director), a goth and Stephen (Stephen Barker Turner) and Tristen (Tristine Skyler) a couple working on a research book about the hysteria surrounding the rediscovery of the Blair Witch. While *The Blair Witch Project* was a sparse, eerie and genuinely scary, Berlinger who is a lauded documentary filmmaker for the *Paradise Lost* series, a true-crime doc series investigating the allegation surrounding the West Memphis Three, sets his sights on the psychology of the Witch Trials which would come to define early New England and make

reappearances throughout American culture most notably with Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and McCarthyism in the 1950s.

Once Jeff's trip goes off the rails the group returns to Jeff's home to figure out the next steps, from there the film becomes a seemingly unintentional fever dream with characters accusing each other of actions no one is sure happened, the police closing in on the groups and strange premonitions that all seem to stem from their night in the woods. Any clarity of these notions and themes within the film have been lost to time as Artisan was apparently unhappy with the more sedate and ambiguous cut that Berlinger turned in and added in new scenes, completely recutting the film leaving it the utterly strange, has-to-be-seen-to-be-believed-mess that currently exists.

Of the many things to take away from *Book of Shadows*, the most interesting element to consider is that an intended narrative about mass hysteria, our consumption and belief in media fell prey to its own fanfare and in doing so became an obfuscated vision of itself, reflecting intension but never going deeper than the surface level."—Alexandra West, film scholar and author of *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jeffrey Donovan (Jeffrey Patterson); Erica Leerhsen (Erica Geerson); Kim Director (Kim Diamond); Tristen Skyler (Tristen Ryler); Lanny Flaherty (Sheriff Cravens); Stephen Barker Turner (Stephen Ryan Parker); Kurt Loder (Himself); Chuck Scarborough (Himself); Joe Berlinger, Sara Phillips, Lynda Millard, Deb Burgoyne, Andrea Cox (Burkittsville Interviewees); Peggy K. Chang, Tony Tsang, Anja Baron (Foreigners); Kevin Murray (Doctor); Keira Naughton (Nurse); Raynor Scheine (Rustin Parr); Dina Napoli, Landra Booker, Jacqui Allen, Sloane Brown (TV Reporters).

CREW: Artisan Entertainment and Haxan Films Presents *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2*. Casting: Will Cantler, Bernard Telsey, David Vaccari. Production Designer: Vince Peranio. Costume Designer: Melissa Toth. Special Effects: KNB Effects Group, Balsmeyer and Everett Inc. Music: Carter Burwell. Director of Photography: Nancy Schreiber. Film Editors: Sarah Flack, Janice Hampton. Producer: Bill Carraro. Executive Producers: Kevin J. Foxe, Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sanchez. Based on characters created by: Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez. Written by: Dick Beebe, Joe Berlinger. Directed by: Joel Berlinger. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Less than a year after the release of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), Burkittsville—formerly Blair—is under siege by tourists and fortune-seekers. One such fortune seeker is former mental patient, Jeffrey Patterson (Donovan), who now runs a tour company called Blair Witch Hunt dedicated to exploring the Black Hills. On his latest excursion, Jeffrey takes two writers—Stephen (Parker) and his girlfriend Tristen (Skyler)—who are doing research on the Blair Witch and mass hysteria, to the foundation of Rustin Parr's house, which burned down years earlier. It is there that Heather Donohue's footage was found, setting off the Blair Witch Craze. Along with a Wiccan, Erica (Leerhsen), and a Goth, Kim (Director), the group stays the night in the Black Hills. The next morning, however, no one can account for hours of missing time, the destruction of Stephen and Tristen's research, or the destruction of Jeffrey's video cameras. Worse, a group of tourists are discovered murdered at Coffin Rock, and the local Sheriff, Cravens (Lanny Flaherty), suspects Jeffrey and his group. Jeffrey brings his clients back to his house, an abandoned factory in the Black Hills, and, after finding his footage, attempts to recreate the mystery of their missing time. Meanwhile, the spirit of a little girl comes to them, and warns the cursed souls they have brought something back from the woods with them; possibly the Blair Witch herself.

COMMENTARY: *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000) followed hot on the heels of *The Blair Witch Project's* (1999) record-breaking box office engagement, no doubt hoping to strike again while the iron was hot. The result is a horror film with moments of fleeting intelligence and promise, but one that feels half-baked. Perhaps this is a case in which a little more development time would have benefited the creative team and allowed for a re-consideration of some of the dodgier ideas. This horror sequel was directed by Joe Berlinger, a thoughtful documentary filmmaker who has helmed such worthwhile efforts

as *Brother's Keeper* (1992), *Paradise Lost* (1996) and *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* (2004). Berlinger is no hack, and the fact that *Book of Shadows* often looks very much like the product of a hack is likely the unfortunate result of heavy creative interference.

Still, the second *Blair Witch* picture suffers from a terrible and unenviable burden: the desperate need to successfully follow-up an innovative hit movie, and yet somehow not seem like a cash-grab. Accordingly, the decision was made not to repeat the found footage formula of the Myrick and Sanchez original. The film's many deficits may all stem from that single creative decision, because going from *BWP*'s hyper-reality to *Book of Shadow*'s traditional "movie" reality is a jarring, and often distasteful experience. One cannot escape the sense that reality, or verisimilitude, has been lost, even sacrificed, in the transition from the first film to the second.

Because of its notable stylistic difference from *The Blair Witch Project*, this sequel feels like it takes place in another universe all-together. It is shot in lush, vivid color, features conventional horror special effects, and casts nubile young women as "eye candy." Even the familiar 1980s "vice precedes slice-and-dice" paradigm is reinstated for this film as the young attractive characters smoke weed, booze it up, and get frisky by moonlight, just in time to be manipulated by the Blair Witch. The result is a film looks and feels very much like a 1997–1999 *Wishmaster* or *Hellraiser* sequel, and one that might have gone direct-to-video. *Book of Shadows* offers up poorly calibrated performances, non-persuasive quick cuts of gore meant to up the film's visual violence quotient, and confusion about how this installment interacts with its famous predecessor.

A quote from the film—"we are all virgins on this bus"—is a good shorthand, actually, for the deficits and challenges of *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2*. After *The Blair Witch Project*, no viewer is a virgin on this particular bus ride. We've all been to the woods, and encountered young people cursed by a reality-bending supernatural entity. We've seen the Burkittsville town sign (now ensconced on a wall in Jeffrey's house), and we've been to the Burkittsville-Union Cemetery too. We've been lost in the woods, and we've contended with altered states of reality. So, with the knowledge that there are no virgins on this bus, how does a filmmaker make this story seem fresh and new again, especially after some moments in the original—including Heather's close-up confession—ascended immediately to the level of pop culture touchstones? *Book of Shadows* doesn't offer a coherent solution for that challenge, so it provides several different alleyways which become, finally, dead ends.

For instance, the film opens with a title card, which establishes that this movie is a "fictionalized" re-enactment of real events. That means that the film acknowledges, up front, that the individuals in the story, like Jeffrey, are being played by actors. That's what the term re-enactment means. Yet when the film purports in its opening scenes to show the audience "real" footage of Burkittsville locals, who shows up there but Jeffrey, played by the same actor (Jeffrey Donovan)? The two moments, taken in tandem, generate creative dissonance. Either Jeffrey is an actor playing a role in a fictionalized "re-enactment" or a real individual caught on tape in Burkittsville as the newscast footage indicates. So, which is it? Because he can't be both.

Secondly, if this is a re-enactment, one wonders why some moments are presented in a highly stylized, two-dimensional, horror-comic-book nature, and others are not. The youngsters, for example, all seem generally "real," not exaggerating their reactions or roles. But just take a gander at the godawful scenes showcasing Jeffrey's stay in a mental hospital. These moments are rife with cockeyed angles, strangely made-up nurses, and doctors, and other aspects of German expressionism, all suggesting not any concept of reality, but rather heightened, comic-book reality. Again, would a re-enactment attempting to recreate a real event adopt this particular visual approach? More to the point, would it tread, at all, into Jeffrey's incarceration and treatment by doctors?

And then consider the performance of Lanny Flaherty as Sheriff Cravens, who plays a stereotypical "hick" law enforcement official. He is such a walking, talking cliché, it is impossible to consider him real, and so again we face a crisis suspending disbelief. No re-enactment would portray a sheriff in such a fashion. A re-enactment desires to seem real; only a horror movie tries to up the ante with such stylized performances.

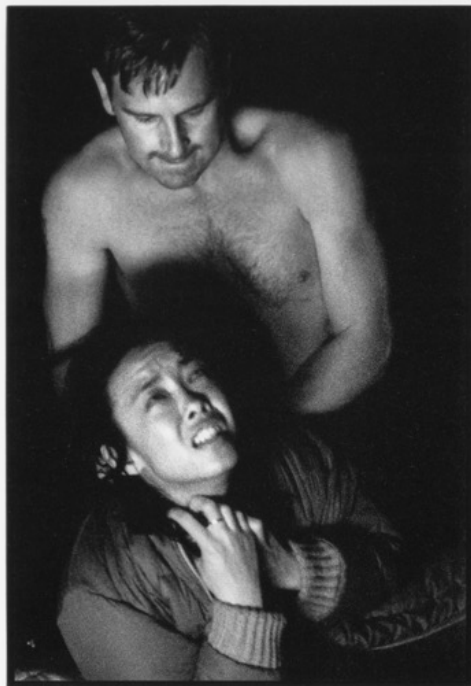
The Blair Witch Project ran on parallel realities. In one interpretation of reality, something supernatural chased down Heather and her friends in the woods. In another, three kids out in the wild got lost, scared themselves silly, and eventually died, leaving behind a testament not to the supernatural, but to their own hysteria. All the cameras saw nothing, or at least nothing that pointed, definitively, to a witch. To its credit, *Book of Shadows* attempts to recreate this meta-reality formula through the characters of Stephen and Tristen, and their viewpoint. Stephen believes that the Blair Witch story is indeed one “*created by hysteria*,” and he even likens Burkittsville to the Bermuda Triangle. By contrast, Tristen thinks the story of the Blair Witch exists in a “*place of truth*.” They keep arguing, and that’s the point. As the film’s dialogue points out, “*perception is reality*,” and everyone possesses different perceptual sets. People select those things that seem to conform to their previous life experience. Therefore, each person experience life a little differently.

At the beginning of the film, for instance, viewers see real-life people Kurt Loder, Roger Ebert, Jay Leno and Conan O’Brien talking on their respective TV programs about *The Blair Witch Project*. Then we meet the locals of Burkittsville and the tourists there. All of these individuals perceive a different reality. For the townspeople, there is a sense of annoyance and bemusement with the tourists. For the tourists there is a promise of encountering something truly new, something truly different. For the TV personalities, it’s all an abstract exercise in either criticism, news reporting, or humor. The idea, again, is that those on the Blair Witch Hunt are the product of these roiling differences in perception and conflicted psychologies. They go out into the woods and commit murder. But they commit murder because either they are hysterical—worked up into a froth by the movie’s popularity—or because a witch now controls them. In many ways, this paradigm points to the problem with modern social media, a failure of citizenry to agree on a consensus reality and hide within bubbles that conform to pre-existing bias.

Unfortunately, *Book of Shadows* vets its dual reality in a scattershot, incoherent fashion. The skeptic, Stephen, for instance, actually sees a backwards-walking child ghost on the bridge to Jeffrey’s house, and she tells him, literally, that he has brought something back from the woods. Stephen never tells anyone about this encounter, and stubbornly clings to his belief that the Blair Witch is just hysteria. Because who is he going to believe: his own masters’ dissertation, or his lying eyes? The film possesses other problems too. A key plot point is the murder of tourists at Coffin Rock. We meet these doomed characters just once, so their deaths mean virtually nothing in terms of the story or in terms of audience identification. There is no drama surrounding their deaths, no feeling of loss, no impact.

The audience also never sees the protagonists murdering them. Instead, there are just violent quick cuts of gory close-ups. These same shots could have been used to establish *anybody* killing the tourists, so they are not exactly persuasive, or memorable. Viewers see these cuts from the very beginning of the film (even during the opening credits), in intrusive insert shots, and they don’t really connect in a way that carries emotional resonance. The audience don’t know the victims, and since it has seen a ghost literally warn the characters about the existence of something evil, viewers never interpret the crimes, as the filmmakers hope, as an act of mass hysteria or madness.

Another “track” going in *Book of Shadows* is one of social critique. The film introduces Jeffrey, who runs a Blair Witch store on-line that sells hats, T-shirts, stick figures, and key chains. He talks about E-Bay, etc. The point seems to be that there is a sucker born every minute, and that *The Blair Witch Project* isn’t so much as a movie but rather a 75-minute advertisement for licensed merchandise. Perhaps this commentary is supposed to be amusing, but is an official sequel to *The Blair Witch Project* the right place for it as a major theme? Ostensibly, people seeing this film want to see the property treated in a respectful fashion, and learn more about its universe (and central, if unseen, figure: the witch). Instead, this movie has the bad taste and temerity to suggest that *The Blair Witch Project* is responsible for inspiring the (fictional) murders at Coffin Rock. But everyone knows from *Scream* (1996), of course, that horror movies don’t make people killers. They make killers more inventive.



Two more illustrations for *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2*. Top: Kim (Director) and Erica (Leerhsen) realize that they are being manipulated by a dark force. Bottom: the truth is revealed as Parker (Turner) murders a Burkittsville “tourist” (uncredited).

Even in terms of pure plausibility, *Book of Shadows* comes up short. Every character begins to get a red rash on their torso that just happens to look exactly like the letters of the Pagan Alphabet, and nobody seems really bothered by it.

Love it or hate it, *The Blair Witch Project* is an immersive experience. Audiences are dropped into the woods with Heather, Josh and Mike, and its hopes and fears rose and fell with each new discovery. *Book of Shadows* never casts an aura like that. It never creates a coherent reality. And without that structure underlying it, the sequel is never frightening. The film is smart enough to know that “people

just want to see something," but this sequel never decides, really, what it should show, or what it shouldn't show. It doesn't even really, decide, what actually happens in the film. It's either a re-enactment or not. It's either mass hysteria or not.

Unfortunately, there are two things that can, finally, be decided about what *Book of Shadows* never is: scary or good.

LEGACY: *The Blair Witch Project* franchise went dormant until the autumn of 2016, when the found-footage film *Blair Witch* was released theatrically, ignoring the events of this sequel, *Book of Shadows*.

The Calling (DTV) * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Laura Harris (Kristie St. Clair); Richard Lintern (Marc St. Clair); Francis Magee (Carmac); Alex Roe-Brown (Dylan St. Clair); Alice Krige (Elizabeth Plummer); John Standing (Jack Plummer); Petter Waddington (Father Mullin); Nick Brimble (Police Inspector Morton); Rachel Shelley (Shelly Woodcock); Camilla Power (Lynette Peterson); Roger Brierley (Reverend); Anthony Carrick (Thomas Biden).

CREW: Constantin Film, IMF, Film GmbH & Co., Productions KG, and Fanes Films present a Richard Caesar Film, *The Calling*. Casting: Ben Charkham. Production Designer: Bernd Lepel. Costume Designer: Pam Downe. Music: Christopher Franke, Dean Landon, Edgar Rothermich. Special Effects: Doug McCarthy, Simon Wilson, Florian Martin, Jurgen Schopper. Director of Photography: Joachim Berc. Film Editor: Alexander Berner. Producers: Bernd Eichinger, Martin Moskowitz, Norbert Preuss. Executive Producers: Matthias Deyle, Yvo Junkers, Robert Kulzer, John Rice. Written by: John Rice, Rudy Gaines. Directed by: Richard Caesar. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: From her bed in a hospital in the UK, an American woman, Kristie St. Clair (Harris) recounts an incredible story to her priest, Father Mullin (Waddington). She tells of how she came to be married to a local newscaster, Marc St. Clair (Lintern), and became pregnant on their wedding night. Their child, Dylan (Roe-Brown), however is not really the fruit of their union, but that of Kristie and the Devil. In other words, Kristie's child, Dylan, is the Anti-Christ. She tells the story of how two friends of the family, Elizabeth and Jack Plummer (Krige, Standing) attempted to influence Dylan and take him away from his mother, and how the only way to kill the Anti-Christ was to drown him (an inversion of the Holy Sacrament of Baptism). Alas, after three days, Dylan was resurrected, and his reign of terror began.

COMMENTARY: Here's yet another bit of unfinished business from the late 1990s. *The Calling* is another Satanic conspiracy movie in the vein of *Bless the Child* and *Lost Souls*. In this case, there's a culture clash between a righteous American mum, played by Laura Harris, and her British husband, played by Richard Lintern. Unbeknownst to the mother at first, her child is being raised by Satanists. Krige and Standing, who play the equivalent of the Castevelts from *Rosemary's Baby* in this tale.

The Calling features much unintentionally funny dialogue. Like the revelation that Marc is not Dylan's father. "You got pregnant on your wedding night ... and not by your husband," she is told. Kristie, at one point, also notes, "If evil had a scent, I could smell it that night."

Something certainly smells here, but it may not be Evil.

Meanwhile, Kristie misses the crushingly obvious signs that Dylan is the Anti-Christ. He cries and screams every time he attends church, for example. And he gets a rash on his chest when he wears a crucifix necklace. Not to mention that the loveable family dog bites him.

Still, Kristie is blithely unaware of the danger, living her perfect “*all-American girl dream*” of marrying Prince Charming. Eventually she does put two and two together and realize that she is losing the battle for Dylan’s soul. For one thing, he gets a Satanic Bible as a Christmas present, and it’s tough to compete with that.

All snark aside, there are many movies that handle this type of story in superior fashion, yet occasionally *The Calling* is borderline effective in its paranoid zeal. The film’s ending is actually haunting as Dylan is revealed, like Christ, to have been resurrected three days after his death. A priest literally throws in the towel at this denouement, ripping off his collar in protest of Evil’s Ascent, and Good’s apparent impotence in the face of such a threat.

The Calling is mostly silly, but occasionally the movie casts a bit of a spell, and ropes one back into its paranoid narrative about evil being coaxed to bloom right under our very noses. There’s a revelation at one point, that the Devil is a lot closer at hand than Kristie realized, and even if the audience sees that revelation coming, there’s a brooding, inevitable sweep to the film that makes it feel compelling at times.

The Cell ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“Singh, yet another in the long line of filmmakers who started in the world of commercials and music videos, displays a knack for composing images that can be both striking and creepy. Looks aren’t everything, but they can go a long way to validating potentially formulaic movies like *The Cell*, a tantalizing thriller that, like its villain, ultimately can’t stop itself from going too far. Singh’s visuals demand your attention from the opening frames, which feature a white-clad Jennifer Lopez walking along the ridge of a huge sand dune silhouetted against a bright blue desert sky.”—Ron Weiskand, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 2000, page 20.

“Looking like nothing so much as a music video that escaped its MTV slot and grew to bloated proportions, *The Cell* relies on striking visuals to carry it through its banal story and dialogue. Though many of those visuals recall the lush but empty imagery of expensive perfume ads, many of them are unpleasant to the point of ugliness or even perversity on the part of the filmmakers in much the way the visuals in ‘*Se7en*’ crossed the line into exploitation.”—Richard J. Leskosky, *News Gazette*, August 25, 2000, page 17.

“...*The Cell*’s flesh-ripping excesses might be forgivable if the movie had a story worth telling to go along with its acute dress sense and fine art direction.... Like the award-winning television commercials that first-time director Tarsem Singh has been cranking out for a Fortune 500 of clients, *The Cell* never stops selling. The movie’s as shrill as some of its fetishistic displays are disgusting. Aggressive camera angles and the jacked-up soundtrack build up just about every single scene as if it were the most important moment in the movie. Effective at first, this artless manipulation grows tiresome and finally unendurable. The technique implies a certain heavy-handed contempt for the audience. Film-goers should react in kind.”—Matt Radz, *The Montreal Gazette*, August 18, 2000, page C1.

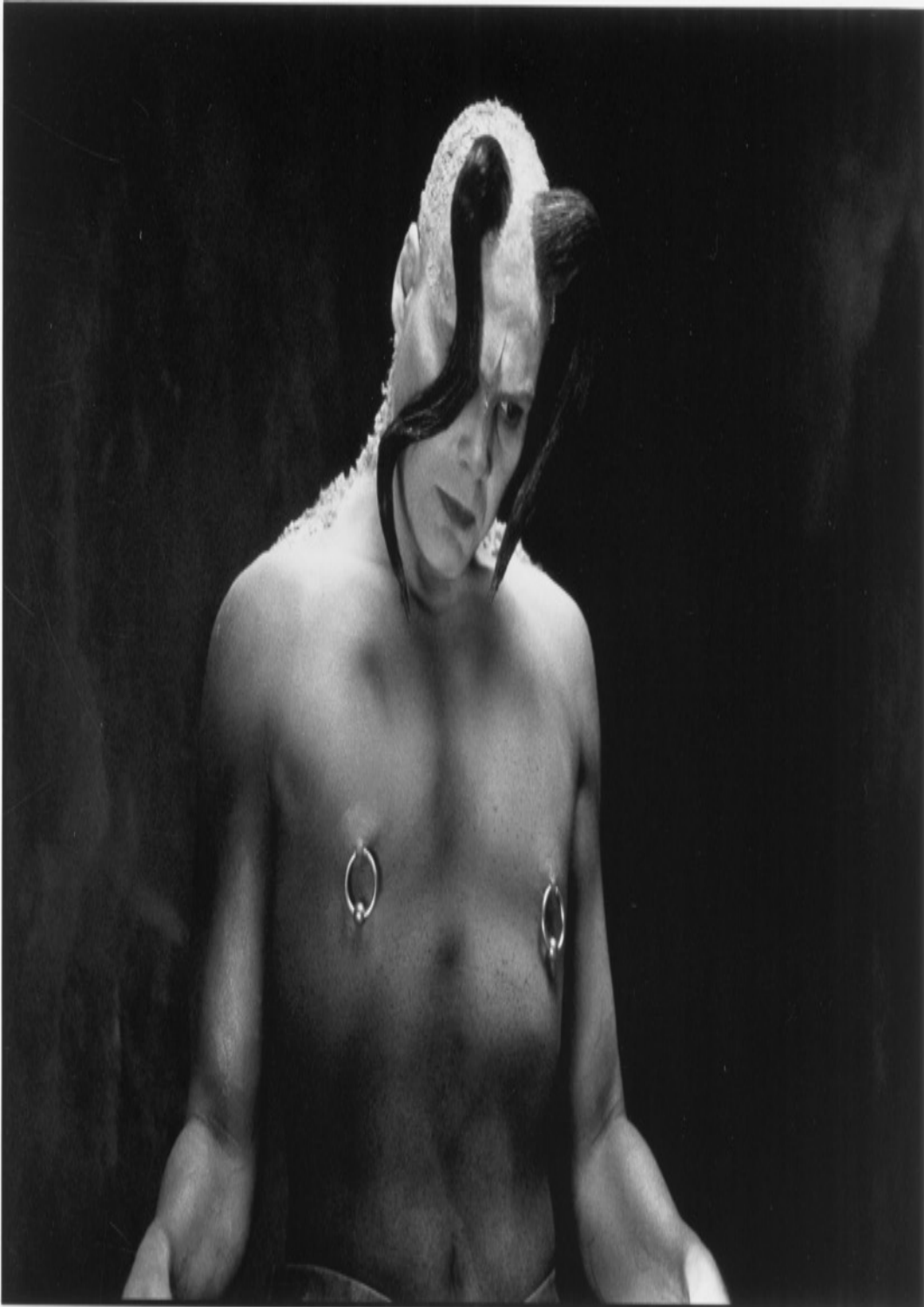
Cast & Crew

CAST: Jennifer Lopez (Catherine Deane); Vince Vaughn (Peter Novak); Vincent D’Onofrio (Carl Stargher); Mariane Jean Baptiste (Dr. Miriam Kent); Jake Weber (Gordon Ramsey); Dylan Baker (Henry West); James Gammon (Teddy Lee); Dean Norris (Cole); Patrick Bachau (Mr. Barnes); Colton James (Edward Baines); Musetta Vander (Ella Baines); Catherine Sutherland (Anne Marie Vicksey). Tara Subkoff (Julia Hickson); Lauri Johnson (Mrs. Hickson).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents a Radical Cinema Production, *The Cell*. Casting: Roma Kress. Costume Designer: Eiko Ishioka, April Napier. Visual Effects Supervisor: Kevin Tod Haug. Music: Howard Shore. Film Editor: Paul Rubell, Robert Duffy. Production Designer: Tom Foden. Director of Photography: Paul Laufer. Executive Producers: Donna Langley, Carolyn Manetti. Producers: Julio Carol, Eve McLeod. Written by: Mark Protosevich. Directed by: Tarsem Singh. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Police detectives capture a twisted serial killer, Stargher (D'Onofrio) who is responsible for the murder (by drowning) of seven female victims. His latest victim, Julia Hickson, will be dead in less than two days unless Stargher informs them where she is trapped. Unfortunately, he has suffered a seizure and is not able to communicate her location. A therapist named Catherine Deane (Lopez), working at the Campbell Center, however, uses a new technology to enter the dreams of troubled individuals, and help heal them. She agrees to travel inside Stargher's subconscious mind, unaware that she is entering a perverted dreamscape, Stargher's personal dark kingdom of terror and pain.

COMMENTARY: Thanks, perhaps, to *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Se7en* (1995), the serial killer was one of the signature “monsters” of the 1990s. As the decade changed, that monster was still popular with audiences, even if the traditional format featuring that monster, the police procedural, appeared to be growing old and stale through over repetition and familiarity. Tarsem Singh's gorgeous and innovative *The Cell* helps to point the way towards the next iteration of the popular monster. So many 80s and 90s films featured (TV) detectives attempting to metaphorically “*get inside the mind*” of a serial killer to determine his next act or victim, but *The Cell* makes that journey a literal one, hurtling a therapist into the frightening mental landscape of the monster.



In *The Cell*, a serial killer Stargher (Vincent D'Onofrio) fashions himself a God (or Devil?) in his dreams.

There will be some viewers who find *The Cell* slow or plodding, and that is a legitimate gripe. However, if viewed as a gorgeous horror travelogue, a deranged yet often inspired (at least visually) version of *Alice in Wonderland*, with Jennifer Lopez's character exploring the dark, oddly compelling landscape of a monster's darkest imaginings, *The Cell* emerges as something different, and even quite beautiful. The film's imagery is powerful, and often conveys the emotions of the film's story better than the admittedly banal screenplay.

Much of *The Cell*'s imagery is hauntingly unforgettable, including the moment that Catherine Dean is confronted with a living breathing horse perfectly—and horrifically—sectioned into pieces. Large panels, like gigantic glass razor blades, lower from a ceiling and dissect the animal with grotesque, mechanical precision, a perfect reflection of the killer's twin obsessions with both order and destruction.



Stargher (Vincent D'Onofrio) terrorizes a therapist trapped in his dreams, played by Jennifer Lopez in Tarsem Singh's *The Cell*.

Similarly, Stargher's triumphant appearance as a bald, golden tyrant—a forecast of Xerxes in *300* (2007), perhaps—looming victoriously over his own mindscape is also a powerful visual of malignant narcissism and self-love. In his self-created world, Stargher is not a sick freak, a lonely, mocked boy with parent issues. Instead, he is a physically intimidating tyrant. In one horrifying vision, Stargher collars the beautiful Catherine, a visualization of misogyny manifested. She is present, this imagery suggests, only for her beauty, not for her mind or own agency. As Stargher notes, she now dwells in his world, and it is one dominated by his rules. A representation of delusional and toxic masculinity, Stargher's madness, we learn, is not merely about control, but specifically, control of women. He would deny them the air they breathe, if they step out of line, which is why drowning is his preferred method of murder.



Jennifer Lopez plays Stargher's plaything in *The Cell*, a serial killer film of a very unique nature.

To make the point about Stargher's domination of his own imaginary world (and lack of domination in the real world), Singh points his camera, at one juncture, at the 1973 animated French film *Fantastic Planet*, which is playing on a television set. That surreal film is set on an alien world wherein human beings are the tiny playthings of giant alien creatures. It's not difficult to see how that very power dynamic is mirrored in *The Cell*, with Stargher standing in for the dominant alien, and Catherine as the object of his whims. Stargher literally sees himself as a different, and superior breed. Even the way he stages his victims, as exhibits in a kind of industrial art gallery, speaks of his egotism. His manner of insidious control is also seen in his attempt to mimic the real world, tricking Catherine into believing that she never left the control room at the Campbell Center, when in fact, she is already ensconced in Stargher's mad, mad world.

Going further, one might see *The Cell*'s visual conflict as being between an Earth Mother, and a healer, Catherine, and a corrupt male product of modern, technological society. Catherine is seen, at points, in a desert landscape, attempting to heal a boy, Edward Baines, who has mysteriously stopped speaking. The dress she wears in this scene flows in conjunction with the wind, and she is seen to be at one with nature. Contrast that "dream" of connection with Stargher's cloistered world of glass, and metal, and industrial blight. He is as separate from nature as Catherine is connected to it. Catherine manages to defeat Stargher, intriguingly, when she reverses the feed of the dream machine, and brings Stargher into her world, defanging the tyrant. She reiterates his line "*my world, my rules*," and both defeats the killer and reclaims her reality/agency in one final blow.

The Cell is a missing link between the 1980s *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, which showcased dream worlds manifested by Freddy Krueger, and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), which similarly concerns the manipulation of dreams. *The Cell* holds onto the idea that if someone gets lost in a dream, they are at mortal risk from the events of the dream (a staple of the Freddy Krueger movies), even as it proposes a scientific instrumentation for the transfer of the mind (or is it soul?) into the dream world; a technological transfer, as it were. Here that instrumentation is called "*neurological synaptic transfer*," and comes replete with uniforms for those involved in the procedure that look like the still suits from David Lynch's *Dune*. (1984).

Some of the moments in *The Cell* involving the police, and the scientists, feels rote and even cheesy, but once Singh's imagination is set free by the dreamscape milieu, *The Cell* transcends its formula and becomes a mesmerizing journey through competing consciousnesses and mind-states. The film's stunning, immersive visuals make all the difference, and transform yet another police procedural/serial killer horror film into something never seen or imagined before.

Cherry Falls (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Brittany Murphy (Jody Marken); Jay Mohr (Leonard Marliston); Michael Biehn (Sheriff Marken); Jesse Watrouse (Rod Harper); Candy Clark (Marge Marken); Amanda Anka (Deputy Mina); Joe Inscoe (Tom Sisler); Gabriel Mann (Kenny); Natalie Ramsey (Sandy); Douglas Spain (Mark); Bre Blair (Stacy); Kristen Miller (Cindy); Michael Weston (Ben); Keram Malicki-Sanchez (Timmy); Joannah Portman (Sharon); Vicki Davis (Heather); Bret McKee (Dylan Roley); Clementine Ford (Annette).

CREW: Rogue Pictures, Fresh Produce Company, and Industry Entertainment present *Cherry Falls*. Casting: Johanna Ray. Production Designer: Marek Dobrowolski. Costume Designer: Louise Frogley. Special Effects: KNB Effects, BiPack Inc. Music: Walter Werzowa. Director of Photography: Anthony B. Richmond. Film Editor: John F. Link. Producers: Marshall Persinger, Eli Selden. Executive Producers: Joyce Schweickert, Scott Shiffman, Julie Yorn. Written by: Ken Selden. Directed by: Geoffrey Wright. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In affluent Cherry Falls, two teenagers, Rod (Watrouse) and Stacy (Blair), are horribly murdered, causing an uproar at the local high school. The town sheriff, Marken (Biehn), believes the murders may be related to a case from 25 years earlier involving someone named Lorelee Sherman and her disappearance. Worse, the killer is apparently targeting virgins, which means that the student body soon realizes it is a matter of life and death for them to have sex. Terrified parents encourage sexual intercourse and the teens plan a party—the “*Pop Your Cherry Ball*”—to “*sexually inoculate*” themselves. Marken’s daughter, Jody (Murphy), is a virgin herself, and soon becomes a target of the killer, even as she learns that Lorelee Sherman’s case strikes close to home and her family.

COMMENTARY: *Cherry Falls* is a tongue-and-cheek, self-aware slasher film in the model of *Scream* (1996) and pre-9/11 efforts of the 2000s such as *Scream 3* (2000) and *Valentine* (2001). The movie rigorously adheres to the slasher paradigm, and also earns points for its satirical approach to teenage sexuality, and, similarly, adult hypocrisy regarding teenage sexuality. *Cherry Falls* is also one of the many horror films of the 2000s (including *What Lies Beneath*, and *Shutter*) to presage the “Me too” or “Toxic Masculinity” concepts that so influenced the American pop culture and national dialogue in the late 2010s. Intelligent and funny, *Cherry Falls* is a fast moving horror film that deserves a wider audience than it has received.

Cherry Falls’ organizing principle—the concept that pulls everything together—is, simply, sex. The crime in the past that creates the modern murderer, and is motivation for his actions, is caused by sexual misbehavior in the past. In the present, the killer murders those who are virgins, and picks settings intended to get the victims before the, ahem, deed, is done, like cars parked at night, with two groping teens inside. Other settings include the “Pop Your Cherry Ball,” again related to sex. The final girl, Jody Marken, is in danger, not only because of her family’s involvement in that crime of the past, but because she is a virgin. And virgins, as noted above, make up this slasher’s victim pool.

The new slasher films, post-*Scream*, for the most part recognize that reviving the slasher paradigm of the 1980s is not mere reason to revisit this sub-genre. Accordingly, *Cherry Falls* substitutes the post-modern, meta-references of the *Scream* saga with some very wicked and on-point jokes about teenage sexuality, and the adult fear of teenage sexuality. The film’s treatment of the so-called high school “slut,” is one such example. In this setting, she becomes the elder statesperson, and expert on staying alive. She provides to female high school students a lecture on the sexual shortcomings of teenage males, including the fact that they can’t find the vagina and once they do, won’t withdraw before ejaculation.

There is also the topsy-turvy scene here in which a concerned father, the sheriff played by Michael

Beihn, advises his daughter, Jody, that she needs to take the lead. He prods her, when he learns that she is a virgin: “*Can you go further than you have?*” A conversation like this puts the lie to causes such as abstinence, pushed by parents. Parents, *Cherry Falls*, reminds the audience, will push any philosophy that they decide is right, even if it means a “*goddamned fuckfest*,” as one character describes the “*Pop Your Cherry Ball*.” All the jokes about sex, and the jokes about parental hypocrisy in the face of a madman who murders virgins, substitute here for the post-modernism seen in *Scream* and eschew the naturalism of old school 1980s slasher films.

Writing from a vantage point of twenty years later, it seems clear that the horror genre, and movies such as *Cherry Falls*, were moving towards a reckoning that the larger culture experienced in 2017, over revelations of sexual misconduct involving Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Brett Kavanaugh, and Donald Trump. The “#MeToo” movement of this era revealed the pervasive nature of such misconduct in the entertainment, and other industries, and pointed to a culture of widespread “*toxic masculinity*,” the idea of male entitlement and power run amuck, shorn from ethics, responsibility, or accountability. When one crystallizes the movement, it is really about the idea of someone, usually a white male, abusing their three “ps”—position, power and privilege to dominate, sexually, a victim.

Impressively, many horror films of the 2000s used this idea as the central point in their stories, whether involving serial killers or the supernatural. *What Lies Beneath*, *Gothika*, *Deadgirl*, *Shutter* and others involve sexual misconduct, and crimes (emotional and physical) so extreme that they generate a supernatural response. Given how difficult it is to achieve a just legal outcome for these crimes, the horror film proposes, quite ethically, that justice is cosmic, at the very least. In the case of *Cherry Falls*, the crime in the past—the rape of a young woman by four drunken, white senior high school students—is one that has never been addressed. No one was ever charged, and those students went on with their lives, unaccountable for what they had done, or the destruction of another’s life. Among them is an authority figure, the Sheriff, himself.

How did horror know to go in this direction, some decade-and-a-half before it burst to the surface of the larger pop culture? There are three reasons, one might conclude.

First, the prevailing situations that created such toxicity and privilege were all in effect in the 2000s, and those predators, listed above, were all well-ensconced in power, already, with numerous victims left on the side of the road, at least metaphorically.

Secondly, this approach speaks to the value of the horror movie as a genre: it often knows what we should fear, or what is roiling society, before the rest of us are consciously aware of it. Horror is always the canary in the coal mine.

Third and finally, the acknowledgment of toxic masculinity is a natural evolution in terms of narrative. The 1980s slashers developed the idea of the Final Girl, an insightful female character who can see beyond convention and who realizes first that there is a predator or monster nearby. By the time of the 2000s, horror movie-goers were increasingly female, and so it is natural that issues important to women would be pulled into the narratives. In the 2000s, the Final Girl not only had to contend with an individual monster, but the “monster” of an unjust society that did not privilege her or hold accountable everyday predators trying to harm her.

Even the film’s title, *Cherry Falls* is integrated into the ideas governing the film. A broken or fallen cherry—a broken hymen—is the literally what must occur to the teens in the film if they are to survive. Yet the broken cherry, like scales falling from our eyes, is also what the town must go through to see the nature of the crime visited on Lora Lee on those years ago.

Certainly, there are moments in the film that one might wish were sharper or cleverer, but in a decade when the new slasher paradigm was already getting old, there is enough invention present here to give the film a second audience. In terms of the lackluster slasher of the 21st century (*Scream 3*, and *Valentine*, to name two), *Cherry Falls* may just be the Sundae with the, ahem, cherry on top.

Crocodile (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Mark McLachlan (Brady Turner); Caitlin Martin (Claire); Chris Solari (Duncan McKay); Julie Mintz (Annabelle); Doug Reiser (Kit); Summer Knight (Sunny); Rhett Jordan (Foster); Greg Wayne (Hubs); Harrison Young (Sheriff Bowman). T. Evans (Shurkin); R. Vern Crofoot (Harvey); Larry Udy (Arnold); Adam Redmon (Lester); Kip Adotta (Stanley the Fisherman); Crystal Atkins (Blond Bikini Girl). Mark Watters (Helicopter Pilot); Miles (Princess).

CREW: Nu Image Presents a De Martini/Davidson Production of a Tobe Hooper Film, *Crocodile*. Casting: Cathy Henderson Martin, Dori Zuckerman, Rebecca Quiroz. Production Designer: W. Brooke Wheeler. Costume Designer: Carin Berger. Special Effects: KNB, Inc. Robert Kurtzman, Gregory Nicotero, Howard Berger. Music: Serge Colbert. Director of Photography: Eliot Rockett. Film Editor: Alan Jakubowicz. Producers: Boaz Davidson, Frank DeMartini, Danny Lerner. Executive Producers: Avi Lerner, Danny Libert, Trevor Short. Story by: Boaz Davidson. Written by: Michael De. Weiss, Adam Gierasch, Jace Anderson. Directed by: Tobe Hooper. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Brady (McLachlan), his buddy, Duncan (Solari), and Brady's longtime girlfriend, Claire (Martin), go on spring break at Lake Sobek. Along for the ride are Hubs (Wayne) Kit (Reiser), Annabelle (Mintz), and Annabelle's dog, Princess (Miles). As the college kids prepare their week of debauchery and run afoul of the local sheriff (Young), two local yokels, while drunk, destroy a nearby crocodile nest. The next day, Hubs steals one of the reptile eggs and the spring breakers are attacked by a giant, vengeful crocodile. The relentless roaming beast lays waste to their houseboat and continues to pursue them on shore.

COMMENTARY: *Crocodile* is likely the worst of the decade's crocodile movies, a roster that also includes *Primeval* and *Rogue*. That said, the picture is directed by genre legend Tobe Hooper, and even if it isn't a great film, this direct-to-video feature is tremendous fun. It is made doubly so for those who are familiar with Hooper's work in horror and are able to plot *Crocodile's* connections to his oeuvre.

Again, the movie is no classic. It features lousy CGI effects, a screenplay that seems to consist mostly of college kids bickering with each other, and some of the situations featured are remarkably ludicrous. But the audience should lean into the "ludicrous" aspect. Hooper seems to share the assessment above of the movie's flaws and, his execution of the material is, to coin a phrase, gonzo. Hooper tosses you in-jokes and allusions to his decades-long film career and engineers some startling jump scares. Make no mistake, this is a minor league horror for a director who has done much better, but the movie is fun in a manner and way that the efforts of the 2000s could often no longer so easily manage.

As this author wrote in *Eaten Alive at a Chainsaw Massacre: The Films of Tobe Hooper* (2001), *Crocodile* is directed by a genre vet who knows and loves every cliché of the format. Here for instance, Princess the dog is of great importance. Everyone knows that in great horror movies such as *Halloween*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, and even Hooper's own *Eaten Alive*, the dog doesn't get out alive. The dog, in fact, is usually the first to die. In fact, in *Eaten Alive*, a crocodile ate a dog named Snoopy at the rundown Starlight Hotel, the film's central location. Here, almost two decades later, Hooper stages a rematch between croc and man's best friend. In the film's most rewarding running gag, Hooper keeps putting Princess in extreme danger, and within reach of the snapping jaws of the titular monster. In each instance, the dog manages an escape, and even survives longer than her owner! Over and over, Princess looks like she is going to buy the farm, and over and over again, she escapes the jaws of death. In one of the film's wackiest sequences, the dog makes a Hail Mary jump into the air, through the croc's teeth-laden maw, and manages to survive. The bite closes a second too late, and Princess skitters off into the woods. The scene is tense and suspenseful, and then utterly, completely silly. Hooper makes his audience shriek one minute, giggle in delight the next. Again, the 2000s simply doesn't have many of these over-the-top, humorous moments to champion.

Crocodile is also funny because it plays a ludicrous remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. It boasts the same manic energy, but the villain is a croc, not a butcher. A bunch of teenagers go on a trip, take a wrong turn, and end up being eaten. The crocodile, like Leatherface, sees them as nothing but meat. In both *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Crocodile*, many of the “dead teenager” characters are shown to be totally unlikable. This distance the audience feels from them lends their deaths an uneasy grotesque, but oddly comic impact. *Crocodile* also recaptures “The false sanctuary” gag from the original *Chainsaw*. There, Sally found what she thought was help in a barbecue stand, only to encounter Cook, one of the cannibal clan. Here, a group of teens hide in another roadside establishment ... at least until the crocodile simply smashes through the walls and starts killing them. Even one of Hooper’s signature shots from *Chainsaw*, of Leatherface chasing Sally through the woods, is mirrored here. That shot always shows a desperate runner nearing in the foreground, the pursuing antagonist looming dangerously close behind, in composition’s background. Given the similarities to Hooper’s most famous film, it will be no surprise to fans to report that a chainsaw itself gets an important cameo in *Crocodile*.

It’s weird to think about, but *Grindhouse’s Planet Terror* later in the decade tried to ape the feeling of a low-rent, wacky horror film. *Crocodile*, by dint of Hooper’s sense of humor and energy, doesn’t ape that kind of film. It is that kind of film. The late, great critic Pauline Kael once wrote that there is often so little great art, that it’s a problem if we can’t appreciate great trash.

Crocodile may not be great art, but it is great trash, made by an artist who understands his art thoroughly. That’ll do, at least for this author, in a pinch.

(Wes Craven Presents) Dracula 2000 * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“The scariest part of the Dracula legend is not that he drinks blood; it’s that he is immortal. Because of this, Hollywood keeps churning out idiotic movies like ‘*Dracula 2000*.’ This modern-day vampire exercise has all the usual ingredients: spattering blood, a Dracula with locks of dark hair and a noble Van Helsing committed to stamping out the evil. What director and co-screenwriter Patrick Lussier (editor of the *Scream* trilogy and *Music of the Heart*) does not offer are pop-outta-your-seat scares or an imaginative thought.”—Vince Horiuchi, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, December 23, 2000, page E6.

“A couple of sharp satiric sequences offer fleeting glimpses of the true millennial vampire movie that got away. In one of them, the film’s smugly seductive Euro-trash Dracula (Gerard Butler) savors a Goth rock music video and pronounces it ‘brilliant.’ In another, he passes unnoticed through the extravagantly draped and punctured throng celebrating Mardi Gras in New Orleans—the city that has replaced London as Vampire Central, thanks to the Lestat novels of Anne Rice. A revived Dracula indeed could move like a born-again homeboy through the most ravenous parasitic subcultures of the modern world: Wall Street. A corporate law firm, Hollywood.... The big surprise, however, is that *Dracula 2000* is at heart a solidly old-fashioned cloak-and-fangs vampire flick. It honors the central traditions of the form a lot more often than it skewers them.”—David Chute, *The Record*: “Craven finds last fresh vein.” December 27, 2000, page E03.

“I’m not sure if this was the first film to ignore the Vlad the Impaler legend and trace the monster’s lineage back to the original sin of the New Testament, but that alone peaked my fancy. Otherwise, another in the long line of *Scream* rip-offs with a supernatural twist.”—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Gerard Butler (Dracula); Jonny Lee Miller (Simon Sheppard); Christopher Plummer (Abraham Van Helsing); Justine Waddell (Mary Heller-Van Helsing); Danny Masterson (Nightshade); Jeri Ryan (Valerie Sharpe); Omar Epps (Marcus); Sean Patrick Thomas (Trick); Vitamin C (Lucy Westerman); Jennifer Esposito (Solina); Lochlyn Munro (Eddie). Shane West (JT); Nathan Fillion (Father David).

CREW: Miramax, Dimension Films in Association with Neo Arts and Magic, present a Patrick Lussier film, *Wes Craven Presents Dracula 2000*. Casting: Sarah Finn, Randi Hiller. Production Designer: Carol Spier.

Costume Designer: Denise Cronenberg. Director of Photography: Peter Pau. Music: Marco Beltrami. Film Editing: Peter Devaney Flanagan, Patrick Lussier. Producer: Joel Soisson. Executive Producers: Wes Craven, Marianne Maddalena, Andrew Rona, Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein. Story by: Joel Soisson and Patrick Lussier. Written by: Joel Soisson. Directed by: Patrick Lussier. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of high-tech thieves break into the private property of millionaire Dr. Abraham Van Helsing (Plummer) at Carfax Antiquities. They steal a coffin after tripping several booby traps. While on a flight to America with their stolen property, the thieves meet a grim fate as Dracula (Butler) awakens from his slumber inside that container. The dark prince is determined to find a woman in America from his past who could determine the shape of his future: Mary Heller-Van Helsing (Waddell). Dracula begins to convert vampire brides to assist him in his quest, including Mary's friend, Lucy (Vitamin C), and a local TV reporter, Valerie Sharp (Ryan).

COMMENTARY: An earnest attempt to resurrect the Dracula mythos one more time, but for the fast-moving new millennium, *Dracula 2000* is nonetheless a mediocre horror film. In part, this lack of overall quality is a result of creative diffidence. The movie never truly decides how it wishes to view Bram Stoker's world and characters. Basically, the film wants to treat Dracula both as a myth, and as real, a hedge which doesn't make a lot of sense. It can't have it both ways, after all.



Dracula arrives in the 21st century. Top: *Star Trek: Voyager's* (1995–2001) Jeri Ryan vamps it up in *Dracula 2000*. Bottom: Omar Epps (center) and Danny Masterson (right) stand ready to fight evil in the same film.

For example, the Van Helsing family line is real and long-lived in the film (thanks to some leeching of Dracula's blood), so it might be said that the film establishes that the details of Stoker's novel are real. They happened. And now it is a century on from those events, or thereabouts. The Van Helsing, and the Dark Prince himself, are real-life characters, recorded in that text. The locations, such as Carfax Abbey (now the home of Van Helsing's Carfax Antiques), are likewise real.

However, once Dracula reaches America, he meets a character named Lucy Westerman, who is clearly supposed to be the novel's Lucy Westenra. So, the book happened as written, and yet it didn't happen as written, unless Dracula simply has an affinity for selecting victims who happen to be named Lucy. Also, the diffidence around the nature of Dracula (real or myth?) makes some of the characters seem less intelligent. Simon works for a fellow named Matthew Van Helsing, in Carfax Antiques, and he is surprised that Dracula is real? He's not very quick on the uptake, one might conclude.



Two more views from *Dracula 2000*. Top: Justine Waddell plays Dracula's would-be bride. Bottom: the three vampire brides of Dracula (left to right: Vitamin C, Jeri Ryan, and Jennifer Esposito).

The film also creates a new origin for Count Dracula, which might be considered problematic. It is learned that he is the historical Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Christ. He is cursed for eternity to “*suffer like no man on Earth.*” This explains why Christian symbols bother Drac so much. Therefore, Dracula is not Vlad the Impaler, a foreign invader (and the original context behind this boogeyman) and not the book's Dracula, either. Again, that means that Stoker's novel is both part of the film's backdrop and not part of the backdrop, which is confusing. Everyone has heard of Dracula, and yet everyone is also surprised when they meet characters right out of the book.

The film also follows the recent trend of making Dracula a sexually alluring hunk rather than a repulsive creature imagined by Stoker. According to scholar Donald Rottenbacher, this new interpretation of Stoker's character was a result of the fact that in modern times, it is sex that sells:

Dracula 2000 freely adapts characters from the Stoker novel. Dracula has a muscular physique even when withered and bloodless. Producer Wes Craven states in the documentary about the making of the film that, “[Dracula] is dark and handsome and dangerous; what more can you ask from a leading man,” while actor Danny Masterson refers to this Dracula as “a pimp” (“Behind the Scenes”). Gerald Butler, who plays Dracula,

uses his sex appeal and polished physique rather than supernatural charisma to charm women. Although the director and writer go to great lengths in the DVD commentary to claim that Butler used Dracula's charisma to prey on women, the acting in the film shows otherwise. This Dracula is a wanton sexual creature....1

The point is not that this approach is invalid or corrupt, merely that it does not reflect Stoker's original intent. And, the appearance of handsome and sexy Dracula in the 2000s likely is one of the contributing factors that led to such efforts as *Twilight*, which featured sparkling, James Dean like vampires. A slippery slope is a logical fallacy, of course, but in the 2000s, the age of physically fearsome and charismatic (rather than merely hunky) Draculas, such as Christopher Lee or Bela Lugosi, is clearly a thing of the past. Throw in some bad CGI to boot, and an unsatisfying resolution and *Dracula 2000* is a shallow, poorly conceived reimagination lacking fangs. The most enjoyable parts of the film involves his three vampire brides, led by Jeri Ryan, and the reckoning that a creature of pure evil would enjoy the modern world (an idea brought to the screen earlier, in 1979's *Time After Time*, involving Jack the Ripper). Still, *Dracula 2000* appears to be high art in comparison to the dreadful *Dracula 3000* (2004).

Final Destination * * * *

Critical Reception

"Surely this is impossible. There must be a mad masked geezer or a knife wielding nutter, or at least a sinister spooky sadist somewhere? Nope. This immaculate, irony-laced psychological thriller will scare the pants off you without ever once showing the force behind the slaughter. But that doesn't make it any less heart pounding or fingernail splitting. In fact, it makes the effect even more frightening.... Cast in the same mould as the deeply ironic *Scream* scarers, this is even better than *Scream 3*. It's fresher, funkier and much more surprising. I have to admit there were three or four moments when I did jump out of my seat and squealed like a pig. If your Friday night seems tame and dull, go to *Final Destination*—it's one place you will never forget."—Nick Fisher, *The Sun*, May 2000, page 28

"Shot in Vancouver in dark, gloomy blue and gray, director James Wong (executive producer of *Millennium*) makes the most of his macabre tone and actually generates a few spine-chilling moments before the film spirals into tongue-in-cheek teen-slasher cliché. The real problem in this otherwise competent teen horror arises about halfway through the film, when psychological suspense is sacrificed for silliness."—Katherine Monk, *The Vancouver Sun*: "Teen thriller loses chills in silliness," March 17, 2000, page C3.

"I've never been so terrified of public transportation in my life. Crafty horror movie that sadly not only makes one root for the macabre, intricate deaths, but to actually laugh along while cringing at the mishaps that lead to the torturous ends of relatively goodhearted people. Director James Wong and his co-writer Glen Morgan's attention to detail (the soundtrack including John Denver's 'Leaving On A Jet Plane,' the loving tribute to early horror directors when choosing characters' names, the obsession with numbers that J.J. Abrams would eventually inherit when creating *Alias* and *Lost*), proves these creators take pride in the genre and weren't hoping to make a quick buck at the expense of teenagers' allowances."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Devon Sawa (Alex Browning); Ali Larter (Clear Rivers); Kerr Smith (Carter Horton); Kristen Cloke (Valerie Lewton); Daniel Roebuck (Agent Weine); Roger Guenveur Smith (Agent Schreck); Chad E. Donella (Tod Waggner); Sean William Scott (Billy Hitchcock); Tony Todd (Bludworth); Amanda Detmer (Terry Chaney); Brendan Fehr (George Waggner); Forbes Angus (Larry Murnau); Lisa Marie Caruk (Christa Marsh); Christine Chatelain (Blake Dreyer); Barbara Tyson (Barbara Browning); Robert Wisden (Ken Browning); P. Lynn Johnson (Mrs. Waggner); Larry Gilman (Mr. Waggner); Randy Stone (Flight Attendant); Fred Keating (Howard Seigel).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Entertainment Film Distributors, Zide-Perry productions and Hard Eight Pictures present *Final Destination*. Casting: John Papsidera. Production Designer: John Willet. Costume Designer: Jori Woodman. Special Effects: Pixel Magic, Cinema Production Services, Flesh and Fantasy. Music:

Adam Hamilton, Shirley Walker. Director of Photography: Robert McLachlan. Film Editor: James Coblenz. Producers: Glen Morgan, Craig Perry, Warren Zide Executive Producers: Richard Brener, Brian Witten. Story by: Jeffrey Reddick. Written by: Glen Morgan, James Wong, and Jeffrey Reddick. Directed by: James Wong. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 98 min-utes.

SYNOPSIS: As a high school class bound for Paris on Flight-180 boards a jet, one student, Alex (Sawa) experiences a terrifying vision of disaster. He sees the plane blowing up on takeoff. Terrified, he leaves the plane with a few friends, including Clear (Larter) and Carter (Smith), as well as his teacher, Ms. Lewton (Cloke). As they return to the main airport waiting area, they see Flight-180 explode mid-launch. This is not the end of the creepy story, however. Soon, the survivors of the doomed flight begin to die, one at a time, in the order they died in Alex's vision. Alex comes to the realization that Death itself is stalking the survivors, bound and determined to carry out its original plan of destruction.

COMMENTARY: With the exception of *Saw*, perhaps, there is no more successful horror franchise in the first decade of the 2000s than *Final Destination*. This film had four entries (as opposed to *Saw*'s six) in a ten-year period and earned praise from critics and love from horror fans for its inventive rewriting of the slasher paradigm.

The slasher films of the 1980s, as one might recall, follows a very specific pattern. Slashers are organized under some principle (like a Holiday or special event, for instance), but as a series of murderous set pieces connected to that umbrella of unity. Part of the thrill of the slasher format is watching characters meet gruesome endings in increasingly inventive and gory kill sequences. *Final Destination* picks up on this notion and carries it even further. Each death featured in the film is lensed like some Rube Goldberg contraption, a series of interconnected mishaps leading to a bloody and gory coup de grace, or denouement. Impressively, however, *Final Destination* differentiates itself from the slasher pack by removing the slasher itself. There is no physical or corporeal villain in the film, only the amorphous unseen presence of "Death," which moves inextricably, like water downstream, to achieve its ends.



Three view of terror from the box-office sensation *Final Destination* (2000). Top left: Alex (Devon Sawa) is dragged from his seat on an airplane after experiencing a terrifying vision. Top right: an intimidated Ms.

Lewton (Kristen Cloke) is about to meet her maker. Bottom: Billy Hitchcock (Sean William Scott) tries to escape death's grasp.

It's easy to see why this notion boasts such appeal. A slasher like Michael, Jason or even rubber reality icon Freddy, must still obey certain laws of physics. Sure, they may skirt them from time to time, but in the end, the slasher is a physical person, with a corporeal identity. They are also, quite simply, a target to shoot at, or stab, or blow-up. By contrast, the *Final Destination* movies make the slasher an elemental force of nature. Certainly, Jason in the *Friday the 13th* movies is often associated with nature (unsettled (a storm rolling in to Camp Crystal Lake for example), but *Final Destination* and its sequels formalize the connection. Death is a force with purpose, drive, imagination and tenacity. And it is elemental. We've all heard the old saying that only two things in the world are certain: death and taxes. If Death is certain, how can its plan be escaped? How is survival possible? With Michael, Jason, or Freddy, there is always the hope that some clever and resourceful final girl will find a way win, or at least survive. With Death as the franchise nemesis, this hope is taken away.

The *Final Destination* films, and the first one, especially, also thrive on an active intellect and sense of gamesmanship. It doesn't take a heck of a lot of imagination to create a movie with a killer wearing a mask, who goes around killing people. But in *Final Destination*, Death uses disparate elements (a gas stove, a kitchen sink, a butcher's knife, etc.) to create a kind of "Mouse Trap" game of inevitability and surprise. It is beautifully accomplished, and intelligent.

The first film in the saga, directed by James Wong, centers around a doomed flight to Paris. This scenario works well for a variety of reasons. First, everyone carries at least a little fear of flying. It is a stressful activity to undertake. The film plays brilliantly and effectively in its early scenes of characters boarding the plane; some experiencing the anxiety and "heightened" atmosphere associated with air travel. Parts of the flying process are inconvenient (waiting in line to board), uncomfortable (finding a good seat), and other parts are downright terrifying (takeoff). The film plays on all these aspects of the universal experience.

Secondly, the idea underlying *Final Destination* concerns fate, about a person with the "vision" to escape a doomed flight, and thus escape Death's plan. Scarcely a year after *Final Destination*, the 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred, using jets like the one in the film as weapons, as guided missiles against NYC, and Washington. In a weird and uncomfortable coincidence, *Final Destination* is about a character evading a doomed flight and Fate's plan, a year before other doomed flights become headline news, and a world-shattering event. Similarly, much reporting in paranormal research suggests that people, before doomed flights, report visions of the disaster ahead, as if the tragedy causes a ripple in our collective unconscious. "I got this weird feeling," Alex tells the FBI in the film. "I saw it happen."

But of course, he wasn't supposed to see it happen. The film quotes from Ecclesiastes 9:12: "For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them." Could any quote better capture the horror of 9/11 than that bit of Scripture? It is terrifying to think about so many people who went to work on 9/11 and didn't come home to their families. It is a difficult concept to grapple with, and yet, again, seemingly precognitively, *Final Destination* picks up on one of the key "boogeymen" of the decade: Fate itself. Unseen, or just barely glimpsed. Working to destroy our plans and, indeed, our lives. *Final Destination* veritably sizzles with electric realization that it mirrors our human understanding of death. We don't know when our number is up.

And if we did know, could we do anything about it?

Most of us are rational, thoughtful people, who understand cause and effect. *Final Destination* is a thrill in its indelible images of death's plan in motion, which makes a mockery of cause and effect. The world still acts by cause and effect, but driving the cause is a malevolent thinker, an intelligent design.

Final Destination is so elegantly directed and so intelligently presented that it doesn't really need to do all the "meta" horror business it tries to pull off. The characters are named for horror movie directors or famous characters (Lewton, Schreck, etc.), and this is a sophisto touch that stands out like a sore

thumb in a movie that mostly operates with an organic sense of intelligence. Look at how smart we are, we know horror history! The other funny/ironic touches are more successful, including the use of the John Denver song, "Rocky Mountain High." Of course, Denver died in a plane crash, so this touch is both ghoulish and knowing.

But the meta material is mostly inoffensive, and by and large doesn't take away from what is a great, crowd-pleasing horror movie that speaks very trenchantly to human existence, in whatever decade. We are all afraid of Death, and all afraid our number might be up. *Final Destination* manifests that fear in terrifying and innovative ways. Tony Todd appears briefly as the chilling, human face of death in one sequence, and he gets the film's best and most resonant line: "*In death there are no accidents, no coincidences, no mishaps, and no escapes.*"

From Dusk Till Dawn 3: The Hangman's Daughter (DTV) ★ ★

Cast & Crew

CAST: Michael Parks (Ambrose Pierce); Rebecca Gayheart (Mary Newlie); Temuera Morrison (The Hangman); Marco Leonardi (Johnny Madrid); Ara Celi (Esmeralda); Jordan Spiro (Reece); Lennie Loftin (John Newlie); Sonia Braga (Quixtla); Danny Trejo (Razor Charlie); Orlando Jones (Ezra Traylor); Kevin Smith (Joaquin); Terence Bridgett (Chato).

CREW: Buena Vista Home Video, Dimension Films, A Band Apart and Los Hooligan Productions presents *From Dusk Till Dawn 3: The Hangman's Daughter*. Casting: Marcia Shulman. Costume Designer: Rory Cunningham. Production Designer: Felipe Fernandez Del Paso. Music: Nathan Barr. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Netter Digital Entertainment, Threshold Digital Research Labs. Director of Photography: Mike Bonvillain. Film Editor: Lawrence Maddox. Producers: Michael S. Murphey, Gianna Nunnari, Meir Teper. Executive Producers: Lawrence Bender, Robert Rodriguez, Quentin Tarantino. Story by: Alvo and Robert Rodriguez. Written by: Alvaro Rodriguez. Directed by: P.J. Pesce. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1913, Ambrose Pierce (Parks) and his companions on a stagecoach, the newlywed Newlies (Gayheart, Loftin), are hijacked by Johnny Madrid (Leonard) and his captive, the beautiful Esmeralda (Celi). Pursued by her father (Morrison), a hangman, Madrid and the others end up at a strange brothel populated by vampires. Esmeralda's fate is to become Santanico Pandemonium, a vampire empress.

COMMENTARY: In the 2000s, a number of popular movie series went forward into the 21st century by traveling backwards in time, by putting up prequels set in franchise "history." *Star Wars*, *The Exorcist*, *Tremors*, *AVP*, the Hannibal Lecter films and even *The Ginger Snaps* franchise all took this route. The second DTV sequel to *From Dusk Till Dawn*, *The Hangman's Daughter*, adopts the same approach.

Released on video on January 18, 2000, this film travels back in time eighty years or so, and reveals how Darth Vader, er, Santanico Pandemonium, began her reign as a fearsome (yet sexy...) vampire at a honey trap in Mexico. The film's coda is set in the 21st-century present, with an immortal Ambrose Pierce still kickin'. Alas, the film's narrative and visualization are both relatively weak and uninspired. It's difficult to escape the notion that *The Hangman's Daughter* tells basically the same story as the 1996 original from Rodriguez and Tarantino. Here, a group of similarly diverse and unsavory characters are captured by outlaws and end up at an establishment that appears innocent (if rough) at first, but is discovered to be run by vampires.

In this film, Ambrose Pierce fulfills the kind of “elder statesman” role of Jacob Fuller (Harvey Keitel) in the original, suffering a kind of mid-life crisis that is resolved through contact with/battle against the vampires. *The Hangman’s Daughter* even apes the first film’s remarkable closing shot (of the pyramid and charnel pit behind the Titty Twister Bar), this time showcasing a similar pullback, and a matte paint of wrecked carriages and so forth at the brothel.

Been there. Done that.

The special effects in the film are also sub-par. There is some inadequate wirework showcasing vampires jumping and in flight, and Gayheart’s transformation to vampire showcases some really ridiculous-looking CGI snake tentacles. These moments tend to work against the authenticity of the film’s gritty period setting in 1913 Mexico.

Prequels can be mixed bag, unless handled very carefully. They basically posit an original “encounter” with a franchise’s trademark evil (The Devil, the Emperor, xenomorphs) that, in the depiction, takes away from the source material in some fashion. For example, doesn’t it diminish Ripley’s story a little, and her battle against the aliens, if a town of 21st-century humans could take out aliens (and predators) by the dozen with conventional weapons like shotguns? Doesn’t Clarice’s relationship with Hannibal the Cannibal feel just a little less special if Hannibal shared a similar cat and mouse relationship with another FBI agent, Will Graham, before her?

Sometimes, a prequel can scuttle the whole franchise, or make the franchise seem ever more ludicrous. In fairness, that isn’t the case with *The Hangman’s Daughter*, which feels not franchise-destroying, but rather like a warmed up rerun of a better, edgier first film. There’s nothing new here, but nothing terribly offensive or terrible either.

LEGACY: A TV series, *From Dusk Till Dawn: The Series*, continued the vampire franchise in 2014.

The Gift * * *

Critical Reception

“...one of the best thrillers of the year.... There are knockout performances throughout this film, most notably from Blanchett but also from Keanu Reeves as an abusive husband and Hilary Swank as a wife who has a few secrets of her own.”—Marc Horton, *Edmonton Journal*, July 20, 2001.

“As in *A Simple Plan*, Raimi captures the desperation and sadness of life among the working poor through countless telling details—anachronistic hairstyles, Kmart ensembles, homes that barely qualify as functional—without resorting to the condescension and ridicule that typify most Hollywood depictions of working-class life. Raimi is particularly perceptive about gender roles, showing the ways the town’s institutionalized sexism not only circumscribes what women can and can’t do, but also stacks the deck against Blanchett even before her ‘gift’ places her in mortal danger.... Raimi’s sure hand and graceful storytelling falter only during the anticlimactic conclusion, a moment as needlessly convoluted and unconvincing as the rest of the film is vivid, compelling, and authentic.”—Nathan Rabin, *The Onion A.V. Club*, March 29, 2002.

“The movie is ingenious in its plotting, colorful in its characters, taut in its direction and fortunate in possessing Cate Blanchett. If this were not a crime picture (if it were sopped in social uplift instead of thrills), it would be easier to see the quality of her work. By the end, as all hell is breaking loose, it’s easy to forget how much everything depended on the sympathy and gravity she provided in the first two acts.”—Roger Ebert, *Rogerebert.com*, January 19, 2001.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Cate Blanchett (Annie Wilson); Giovanni Ribisi (Buddy Cole); Keanu Reeves (Donnie Barksdale); Katie Holmes (Jessica King); Greg Kinnear (Wayne Collins); Hillary Swank (Valerie Barksdale); Michel Jeter (Gerald Weems); Kim Dickens (Linda); Gary Cole (David Duncan); Rosemary Harris (Annie’s Granny); J.K. Simmons (Sheriff Pearl Johnson); Chelcie Ross (Kenneth King); John Beasley (Albert Hawkins).

CREW: Lakeshore Entertainment, Paramount Classics and Alphaville Present *The Gift*. Casting: Deborah

Aula. Production Designer: Neil Spisak. Costume Designer: Julie Weiss. Special Effects: Illusion Arts. Music: Christopher Young. Director of Photography: Jamie Anderson. Film Editors: Arthur Coburn, Bob Murawski. Producer: James Jack, Gary Lucchesi. Tom Rosenberg. Executive Producers: Sean Daniel, Gregory Goodman, Ted Tannenbaum, Rob Tapert. Written by: Billy Bob Thornton, Tom Epperson. Directed by: Sam Raimi. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 111 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the Deep South, a fortune teller and mother of three, Annie Wilson (Blanchett), tries to keep her family financially afloat after the accidental death of her husband. One of her clients is a victim of domestic abuse, Valerie Barksdale (Swank). Another is a mechanic who suffered sexual abuse in his family, Buddy Cole (Ribisi). When a local socialite, Jessica King (Holmes) disappears shortly before her wedding, Annie is recruited by her wealthy father (Ross) to help learn the truth. Annie experiences disturbing psychic visions of Jessica's murder, which makes her a threat to the killer. Valerie's husband, Donnie (Reeves) is arrested for the crime, given his history of abuse, but even after he is convicted and sent away, Annie faces danger.

COMMENTARY: It's strange to reckon with *The Gift* as a product of master-stylist (and humorist) Sam Raimi's imagination. The maestro of *The Evil Dead*, and this decade's *Drag Me to Hell* is renowned for over-the-top gore, dazzling camerawork, and a Three Stooges-inspired sense of wacky fun. Yet *The Gift* is a heartfelt character piece, akin to supernatural thrillers such as *Stir of Echoes* (1999), or *The Sixth Sense* (1999). In short, *The Gift* isn't Raimi's typical mode of operation. That fact established, *The Gift* is a carefully-crafted film about the collision of the natural world with the supernatural world, and a film in keeping with the 2000s obsession with "Men Behaving Badly." In particular, films such as *What Lies Beneath* (2000), *Shutter* (2008) and *Deadgirl* (2008) all contend with infidelity, and murder or abuse, on the part of men (or boys) who appear respectable on the surface, but underneath are actually criminals or miscreants. *The Gift* involves both a redneck domestic abuser, Donnie, who is readily seen as dangerous to women (and by some women, as tantalizing because of it). But the actual murderer is someone with a position of authority in the town of Brixton, Georgia, and who hides his murderous impulses under the veil of respect-ability.

In terms of its presentation of the supernatural or paranormal world, director Raimi attempts to link nature with the supernatural on many occasions, thus forging the idea that Annie's gift is not magic, or evil, but an aspect of the established, empirical world, like Earth, air, fire or water, that she can simply tap into. In particular, Raimi connects Annie's visions and powers with water. One psychic vision occurs when Annie sees a pencil fall off of Wayne's (Kinnear) desk at school. When it hits the ground, the pencil lands in a puddle, and a corpse's dirty feet are there too. Two universes have collided.

At other points in the film, the sky is like a swamp, with a corpse floating above Annie, and at another junction, the spirit seeking justice from Annie appears in her bathtub, which is drip, drip, dripping water. The idea of water as a medium for the supernatural is carried throughout the film and suggests that the supernatural is like water in some ways. It seeps into Annie's consciousness. It washes over her. It crashes into her reality, like a wave. Even the film's opening views of a local, watery swamp suggest the idea of water and the supernatural sharing qualities. Both are natural, both are real, and both can be invasive.

Perhaps, in a #MeToo world, *The Gift* might be seen as an even stronger and more relevant horror film than its original context. Annie navigates not only the supernatural world in the film, but one dominated by abusive, dangerous men. Buddy's father sexually abused him, and destroyed his life, essentially. Donnie Barksdale is an aggressive wife-beater and rage-a-holic who attacks anyone that stands in his way. And Wayne, of course, is a murderer hiding in plain sight. Buddy's father, Donnie, and Wayne all are the product of privilege, allowed to carry out their campaigns of terror without meaningful interference from the authorities. Donnie goes to jail, eventually, but ironically not for beating his wife or threatening Annie's family, but for a crime he did not commit, homicide. The establishment is looking to solve a crime, and he becomes a convenient scapegoat. But he is not paying,

importantly, for the crimes he is actually responsible too.

The gender dynamics of *The Gift* are crucial to any discussion of the film, as they involve the victims of abuse and crimes coming back, in some fashion, to right wrongs. Jessica comes back from the dead, accusing her murderer. And Buddy also fights back, not against his own abuser, but to save Annie from Wayne. He can't stop what his father did to him, but he can and does save his friend, Annie, from suffering Jessica's fate, or even his own. Buddy acts heroically, from beyond the grave to accomplish this task. Accordingly, the supernatural in *The Gift* might be seen as an avenue for righting wrongs, for balancing the scales of cosmic justice. Both Jessica and Buddy act from "the other side" to stop the men on "this side" who have victimized and continue to victimize innocent people on this mortal coil. This idea might be interpreted, 17 years ahead of #MeToo as karma. The idea that wrongs may go uncorrected for a time, or by the law, but that, eventually, the truth will be known, and the guilty will pay for their trespasses. Certainly, this is something that Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby and other serial abusers have reckoned with.

Although not a typical Raimi horror film, *The Gift* is smart, funny, emotionally intimate, and far ahead of its time in its depiction of the supernatural as an avatar for that dreaded term (on the right, anyway): social justice. The men in Brixton who hold power—whether through brute force, like Donnie, or the rubric of "respectability," like Wayne, are unseated from those positions by those they have hurt or would like to hurt. The "gift" of the movie's title is not merely Annie's ability to access the supernatural, but her ability to rally those who like her, have little standing in her community (again, in the deep south of Georgia), to strike a blow against those who harm and hurt others as a matter of course, but get away with it scot free.

Hellraiser: Inferno (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Craig Sheffer (Detective Joseph Thorne); Nicholas Turturro (Det. Tony Nenonen); James Remar (Dr. Paul Gregory); Doug Bradley (Pinhead); Nicholas Sadler (Bernie); Noelle Evans (Melanie Thorne); Lindsay Taylor (Chloe); Matt George (Leon); Michael Shamus Wiles (Parmagi); Sasha Barrese (Daphne Sharp); Kathryn Joosten (Mother); Carmen Argenziano (Captain); Christopher Neiman (Pathologist).

CREW: Dimension Films, Miramax and Neo Art & Logic present *Hellraiser: Inferno*. Casting: Ed Mitchell, Robyn Ray. Production Designer: Deborah Raymond, Dorian Vernacchio. Costume Designer: Julia Schklair. Music: Walter Werzowa. Special Effects: David Waine, Barbara Wilder, Phillip Giles, Jamison Goei. Director of Photography: Nathan Hope. Film Editor: Kirk M. Morri. Producer: W.K. Border, Joel Soisson. Executive Producers: Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein. Written by: Paul Harris Boardman, Scott Derrickson. Directed by: Scott Derrickson. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A corrupt, sleazy police detective, Thorne (Sheffer), cheats on his wife with prostitutes and is a drug addict. He becomes involved in a ritual murder case involving the Lament Configuration, the Box which can open the doorway to Hell and summon Pinhead (Bradley) and his Cenobites. As Thorne goes in search of a mysterious crime figure called the Engineer, he continues to consult with his psychologist (Remar) and indulge in his bad behavior. In the end, however, he finds he has been chasing his own tail, and that the Lament Configuration is the answer to his fate, not a clue in a mystery to be solved.

COMMENTARY: There's something to be said for modest ambitions or aspirations. The fifth *Hellraiser* film in the ongoing franchise—and the first to be released directly to video—seems to understand this

fact and act accordingly. Instead of shooting for the moon, or rather “Hell on Earth” (like the third film) or “Hell in Outer Space” (like the fourth film) this film from co-writer and director Scott Derrickson co-opts the *film noir* format and vets a small-scale but compelling story about a dissolute cop who, believing he is on a murder case, learns that he is actually chasing his tail; that he is already in Hell, reliving a piece of his life (and his bad behavior) again and again.

This may not sound like a typical *Hellraiser* plot, but it possesses virtues worth noting. First, the tight focus on one, somewhat disreputable character makes room for some good acting and characterization, and the film’s central performance by Sheffer is strong. And secondly, the more modest approach to narrative takes into account the fact that horror derived from personal, individual foibles can be as powerful, and perhaps far more identifiable, than horror movies relying wholly on spectacle and special effects. Lest one forget, the original *Hellraiser* (1987) was a family tale concerning the ways that Frank Cotton’s vices infected his extended family and all-but-destroyed it. *Hellbound* (1988), the first sequel, was equally brilliant, yet vetted the story on a much broader canvas, with a trip to Hell itself. The third and fourth sequels adopted the approach of *Hellbound*, and attempted to tell bigger and bigger stories, with fewer and fewer positive results to show for the effort. With a reduced budget and non-theatrical distribution, it would have been a colossal mistake for the fifth *Hellraiser* to attempt, again, to wow via special-effects and spectacle. Something different was in order, and *Inferno* is different, but keeps quality high.

Hellraiser: Inferno is grounded and small, indeed, but another way of describing these qualities is to note that it is intimate and individual. Perhaps more importantly, *Hellraiser: Inferno* possesses a rock-solid cinematic mold or formula to follow, *film noir*. Over the decades, horror and film noir have fit together hand-in-glove in superlative efforts such as Alan Parker’s *Angel Heart* (1987), and Roman Polanski’s *The Ninth Gate* (1999), and again, the hybrid works effectively in *Hellraiser: Inferno*. In particular, the galvanizing notion of the *film noir* is that the hero (usually a detective) goes on an investigation that leads, ultimately, to himself. The outward mystery in other words, leads to an inner discovery about the nature of the hero’s true self. That is very much Thorne’s journey in *Hellraiser: Inferno*. His journey appears on the surface to be a gruesome police procedural about ritual murders and the mystery identity of “The Engineer,” but in fact the journey is about his own nature, and the way that he has destroyed his life, and his eternal soul. Thorne is an intriguing character because he believes that he lives in a world of facts, and that he has a facility for solving puzzles. What he can’t solve, at least for some time, however, is the nature of his own flawed character. That’s the puzzle that should be of the most concern to him. Thorne has corrupted his innocence by destroying his marriage, his family, and even his body (through drug use). His philosophy that “*all things can eventually be explained*” is true, and in the end, he understands the Hell he has created for himself. He has been arrogant not only in his confidence in himself, but in his understanding of the universe. In the film, a character warns that if one “*hunts the Engineer*,” the Engineer will “*hunt you*” in return. In a very real manner, the movie is about all the myriad ways that Thorne has “engineered” his own dark fate, an eternity in Hell. He is the sole author of his misery and infinite torment.

The downside to *Hellraiser: Inferno*’s modest aspirations is that Pinhead and other Cenobites barely make cameo appearances, and many long-time fans of the franchise will be disappointed by their lack of screen time. Similarly, by the year 2000 the police-procedural approach to horror and thriller storytelling was so pervasive on film and in television programming that even when used well (as is the case here), it still feels hackneyed and clichéd. Also, *Hellraiser* fans want to see Hell again, with Leviathan, lord of the labyrinth and other call-backs to franchise history. A tale about a fallible cop investigating his way right into eternal damnation may not fit pre-conceived notions of what a *Hellraiser* movie should be about. And yet the film is well-made, confident, and much better than the other direct-to-video franchise films of the decade, whose titles include *Hellseeker*, *Deader* and *Hellworld*.

Hollow Man ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"A high-tech fusion of *The Invisible Man* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, it lets director Paul Verhoeven (*Starship Troopers*, *Total Recall*) show off some gruesome, state-of-the-art computer effects and exercise his gleeful brand of brutal action. But his filmmaking energy is wasted on a weak script and characters so two-dimensional, they're virtually all transparent.... This would be a lot more interesting if Caine started off as someone recognizably human; he's already such a cad when we first meet him, his later bad isn't surprising. This is a guy who calls himself God, after all.... The only reason to see *Hollow Man* is to check out the computer-generated effects. Yes, you will believe there's an invisible man onscreen. You just won't be very interested in him. The most spectacular sequences are when Caine takes the formula, and gains transparency from the outside-in. It looks as if the skin is melting off his body, revealing the sinews and blood vessels beneath. The effects are fascinating, and pretty gross."—Steve Murray, *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 2001, page 14

"The *Hollow Man* title, resonating with the title of T.S. Eliot's famous poem, *The Hollow Men*, also suggests some of the psychological nuances of the film. *Hollow Man* takes the viewer into Caine's psyche as he gives in to the egocentric and megalomaniacal tendencies that helped drive him to the top of his field and put him in charge of the project to begin with. Certainly, there's some of the usual Hollywood suspicion of science and scientists, but the film does ground its action in reasonably well-limned, believable characters. Too bad that they fall into the familiar movie mistakes of splitting up their forces when they should stay together. But I suppose panic can do that, and even scientists can panic. Of course, why nobody thinks of turning off the lights so that the good guys would have more of an advantage with their infrared goggles is a harder question to answer. In any case, '*Hollow Man*' is a good sci-fi (or maybe horror) thriller that can have you on the edge of your seat or wincing as the semi-invisible bodies start thrashing their innards about."—Richard J. Leskosky, "*Hollow Man: Few Visible Flaws*," *News Gazette*, August 18, 2000, page 18.

"*Hollow Man* lacks scares, suspense, or a single non-synthetic character. Problem number one is Kevin Bacon's character has no range. He begins as a megalomaniac and has nowhere to climb once he's driven 'insane' by the invisibility. He's a creepy Peeping Tom and sexual harasser to begin with. Invisibility gives his character more of a means than a motive, since the instinct to be a monster was always inherent. Had the filmmakers begun with a sympathetic character, we could be drawn by his past relationship with Elizabeth Shue and the tragedy of his growing psychosis. Instead he started as a jerk and died as a translucent jerk.

Shue, who gave her all (emotion, soul, talent) in the Oscar-nominated *Leaving Las Vegas*, must have left it all in Las Vegas, for in this film, she's got two emotions: pouty and bug-eyed fear. Paul Verhoeven slaps on sick violence and lots of breast shots because he must have been aware from the start that his story travels nowhere fast."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Elisabeth Shue (Linda McKay); Kevin Bacon (Sebastian Caine); Josh Brolin (Matthew Kensington); Kim Dickens (Sarah Kennedy); Greg Grunberg (Carter Abbey); Joey Slotnick (Frank Chase); Mary Randle (Janice Walton); William Devane (Dr. Kramer); Rhona Mitra (Sebastian's Neighbor); Pablo Espinosa (Warehouse Guard); Margot Rose (Mrs. Kramer); Jimmie F. Skaggs (Wino); Jeffrey George Scaperotta (Boy in Car); Sarah Bowles (Girl in Car); Kelli Scott (Mom).

CREW: Columbia Pictures, Sony Pictures Release, and Global Entertainment Productions presents *Hollow Man*. Casting: Howard Feuer. Production Designer: Allan Cameron. Costume Designer: Ellen Mirojnick. Special Effects: Amalgamated Dynamics, Banned from the Ranch Entertainment, Cyber FX, Rhythm and Hues, Sony Pictures Imageworks SPI, Tippet Studio. Music: Jerry Goldsmith. Director of Photography: Jos Vacano. Film Editing: Mark Goldblatt. Producer: Alan Marshall, Douglas Wick. Executive Producer: Marion Rosenberg. Story by: Gary Scott Thompson, Andrew W. Marlowe. Written by: Andrew W. Marlowe. Directed by: Paul Verhoeven. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 112 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Dr. Sebastian Caine (Bacon) runs a top secret, subterranean laboratory with the help of his ex-lover, Linda (Shue), her current lover, Matt (Brolin), technician Carter (Grunberg) and veterinarian Dr. Sarah Kennedy (Dickens). There, working for the military, Caine tests an invisibility serum on caged animals including gorillas and dogs. However, work is going too slowly on the serum, and Caine decides that it is time for human experimentation. Without permission, he tests the drug on himself, and becomes invisible. Unfortunately, as Caine learns, the process is not easily or readily reversed. Isolated and invisible, Caine descends to madness, first peeping on and then raping a neighbor (Mitra). Linda and Matt attempt to stop Caine's reign of terror, but soon he has control over the lab, and his murderous attention turns to his co-workers.

COMMENTARY: According to screenwriter William Marlowe, quoted in the press kit for Paul Verhoeven's *Hollow Man*, his script serves as “*an exciting morality play about a charismatic leader held in check by society's rules. With no clichés, we see what transpires as these rules are slowly removed, just as the layers of his body disappear.*” That description helps to explain why *Hollow Man* plays the way it does. It is, one might conclude, a result of what was happening in American culture as the film was conceived. At the end of the 1990s, President Bill Clinton was impeached for lying about an affair with a 24-year-old intern, Monica Lewinsky, that he conducted in the Oval Office. Clinton lied about the affair to his wife and daughter, his colleagues in the White House, investigators, and to the country at large. It was a monumentally destructive act, both to those around him, including Lewinsky, and himself. Taking Clinton out of the equation for the moment, the country witnessed a person of great power using that power in an immoral way, perhaps because he believed he wouldn't get caught.



Portrait of emptiness. Dr. Sebastian Caine (Kevin Bacon) achieves his dream of invisibility in Paul Verhoeven's *Hollow Man* (2000).

Sebastian Caine, the brilliant scientist of *Hollow Man*, is cut from the same cloth. And since his bad behavior is directed, for the most part, at women, including his ex-girlfriend, Linda, Dr. Kennedy, and an unsuspecting neighbor, this film is also one of the “Men Behaving Badly” horror films of the 2000s, alongside such efforts as *What Lies Beneath* (2000), *Hard Candy* (2005), *Dead-girl* (2008), and more. Caine notes in the film that his violations are amusing to him. “*You have no idea how much fun this is,*” he explains. That “fun” behavior includes voyeurism, while watching his neighbor disrobe, and ultimately sexually assault, as he rapes her. While invisible, Caine also unbuttons Dr. Kennedy’s blouse, and massages her breasts without consent. Again, because he can get away with it. *Hollow Man* argues, quite cogently, that Caine has had this darkness in him all along, and that not being able to be seen—to be caught—has freed him to let his demons loose. “*Was it the serum that fucked you up, or was it the power?*” Caine is asked. And again, considering Clinton, Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, Donald—“*Grab her by the pussy*”—Trump, the answer now seems obvious. If given the opportunity, Caine will act badly, and invisibility gives him that opportunity.



Four views of an invisible man, from *Hollow Man*. Top left: Dr. Kensington (Josh Brolin) and Janice Walton (Mary Randle) show Sebastian Caine (Kevin Bacon) his new appearance. Top right, bottom left and bottom

right: the invisible man is given a latex face so he can be seen.

It is curious to consider that the 2020 horror film *The Invisible Man*, starring Elizabeth Moss, features a sustained attack on a woman that begins with gaslighting and graduates to assault and murder, by another invisible man consumed with control and power. *Hollow Man* is very similar in approach and theme, but it focuses on the perpetrator and his crimes, rather than the victim of his attacks. Shue's character is a strong protagonist, and one whom Caine frequently harasses. So much so that she experiences nightmares of being raped by him. His advances cross the line from being playful to dangerous. "You want to know what it's like to make love to an invisible man?" He asks. The question alone is inappropriate, given her relationship with Matt, a co-worker. He's a toxic boss, and she's trapped in a toxic workplace. The movie makes that much plain. Even his name, Caine, suggests the character's darkness, as Cain was, Biblically-speaking, the first human being to act on his murderous impulses. This Caine is the first invisible man, and he too resorts to murder.

What differentiates *Hollow Man* from *The Invisible Man* of 2020 is not merely character focus on abuser rather than victim, but its focus on special effects. The modern *Invisible Man* does surprisingly little in terms of visualization of the invisible man, saving its quiver of special effects for a few (effective) jump scares. By contrast, *Hollow Man*, at least in 2000, is a special-effects showstopper that doesn't skimp on shock and awe, to co-opt a phrase appropriate to the decade it was released. The audience watches as layers of Caine's body disappear, one at a time, and the sustained, incredible effects tell the story. This is a stripping down of the man to his core basics, ripping his physicality away at the same time his emotional/mental safeguards are ripped away to expose his true nature. The elaborate effects in a very trenchant way reflect Caine's inner journey. What is under the skin? Literally muscle and bone. Metaphorically, Caine's uncaged id.

The other piece of *Hollow Man*'s equation involves the treatment of animals. The film's opening shot is of a rat being eaten by an invisible creature (a gorilla). Later, there are animals in cages and invisible dogs featured as well. These animals are treated pretty shabbily, even though the special effects visualizations are strong, such as the moment a visible serum moves through the veins of the invisible simian. However, the scenes involving the animals suggest, perhaps, that man and animal are alike. Unseen and invisible, they resort to their worst or more accurately, their predatory selves. The animals are thus a point of comparison for the audience when understanding Caine's disintegration.

Perhaps disintegration is the wrong word. Caine reaches his true self by becoming invisible. It's interesting to note that this film is not called *The Invisible Man*, like the recent remake or past such films, but rather *Hollow Man*. The word "hollow" is defined as "having a hole or empty place inside." That is a good description of Caine. He is a genius, yes, but an insecure, power-hungry, narcissistic genius. When it comes to empathy, humanity, and other qualities, he is vacant, unfilled, and indeed, hollow. Even the film's title reflects its theme about human nature, when *The Invisible Man* would have probably been a title with a bigger draw at the box office.

Hollow Man is not a perfect film by any means. At times, it lacks the caustic bite of Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997) or *Robocop* (1987), two films of brutal social commentary and satire. And the last act descends into a series of horror movie clichés rather than maintaining its focus on character, and Caine's character, specifically. In the end, he becomes, simply, another monster to be destroyed, as Matt and Linda attempt to escape their underground laboratory by climbing up an elevator shaft. The special effects are universally impressive, and the performances are always good, but *Hollow Man* finally resorts to mechanical twists, turns and jumps, and that hurts the picture overall. In the end, despite all the good material and intelligent handling of the material, the audience ends up feeling a little hollowed out by the experience of the movie. This movie has a great central metaphor—the stripping down of a person's exterior to reveal his true self, but ultimately wants to spend more time on (good) effects than exploring the conceit.

Leprechaun in the Hood (DTV) *

Critical Reception

"*Leprechaun: In the Hood* is the classic example of a time when films slowly achieved cult classic status in the aisles of Blockbuster Video rather than somewhere on the internet. The title alone is one reason why the film became such a cult hit in the early 2000s, but the plot itself is just as absurd. The film follows three Los Angeles rappers who accidentally free an evil leprechaun imprisoned by a record producer 20 years before. The leprechaun soon finds himself dealing with police brutality, the rap game, and smoking weed. While hip-hop themed blaxploitation can be hit-or-miss, *Leprechaun: In the Hood's* bizarre mix of ingredients make it worth a watch."—*Newstex Finance and Accounting Blogs*, "9 Cheesy Horror Movies That You Have to See."

"Does the world really need a fifth *Leprechaun* movie? Although touted as a horror film, the filmmakers have fun with this one and include quite a bit of tongue-in-cheek humor.... For fans of cheesy, comedy filled horror movies, this film will not disappoint. Surprisingly, the actors' performances are adequate, and horror and hijinks generate enough laughs to keep viewers interested."—Donovan Whitworth, *Video Store Magazine*, February 7–March 4, 2000, page 31.

"This film is funny, irreverent and, in all sorts of little but unmistakable ways, smart. It finds a way to use the inner-city/rap-industry backdrop to this slasher movie about an evil leprechaun to tell a Faustian tale about the price of trading what you've got for what you want. The story centers on a trio of young men who are working hard to fulfill their dreams of becoming hip-hop's next heroes. They find themselves in possession of the evil leprechaun's magic flute (don't ask how) and the movie establishes a depth and resonance to their choices and actions that most slasher movies never even attempt."—Tom Maustad, *Salt Lake Tribune*: "Leprechaun in the Hood"—Silly Title, Funny, Irreverent, Smart Film." April 26, 2000, page D5.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Warwick Davis (Leprechaun); Ice-T (Mack Daddy); Anthony Montgomery (Postmaster P); Rashaan Naal (Stray Bullet); Red Grant (Butch); Dan Martin (Jackie Dee); Lobo Sebastian (Fontaine Rivera); Ivory Ocean (The Reverend Hanson); Jack Ong (Chow Yung Pi); Bleu DaVinci (Slug); Bebe Drake (Post's Mother); Donna Perkins (Jackie Dee's Wife).

CREW: Trimark Pictures, and Lionsgate Home Entertainment present *Leprechaun in the Hood*. Casting: Kim Williams. Production Designer: Nava. Costume Designer: Elizabeth Ennis. Special Effects: Encore Visual Effects. Music: Nicholas Rivera. Director of Photography: Mike Mickens. Film Editing: J.J. Jackson. Producers: Bruce David Elsen, Darin Spillman, Mike Upton. Written by: Doug Hall and John Huffman. Based on characters created by: Mark Jones. Directed by: Rob Spera. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Leprechaun's magic flute, which can make dreams a reality, is in the hands of an avaricious Los Angeles crook named Mack Daddy (Ice-T). The Leprechaun is released from his imprisonment as a statue, when a group of young would-be rappers get their hands on his flute. The rappers dream of fame and fortune, unaware that they are playing with fire as the diminutive demon adjusts to life in the hood and uses all of his mystical abilities to recover his stolen goods.

COMMENTARY: *Leprechaun in the Hood* ends with the titular Leprechaun, again played by Warwick Davis, rapping with a mic on stage, while zombified fly girls in tight gold dresses dance around him seductively. "*Lep in the hood, come to do no good*," he raps, his Irish brogue intact. It's a weird sequence, and oddly, the high point of this underwhelming sequel to a franchise that endured throughout the 90s and 2000s.

The *Leprechaun* franchise is a strange one. There isn't even one good film in the series, really. The first film was a surprise box office hit in the early 1990s and is remembered today for featuring a young Jennifer Aniston, before her fame on *Friends* (1995–2005). But it wasn't a very strong horror film. Most beloved horror franchises, whether *Halloween*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Alien*, or *Hellraiser* at least

start off with a film that might reasonably be termed great. *Leprechaun* began its life in mediocrity, and it has been all downhill from there. In fact, every sequel since that first film has, similarly, been grades of terrible, with *Leprechaun 4 in Space* likely being the very worst of the bunch. The series is definitely “camp” horror in style, and a relic from the end-stage of the rubber reality films, a period in film history characterized by the last few Freddy movies, and the last theatrically released *Hellraiser* films.



He's just a lep in the hood, come to do no good. Warwick Davis stars in *Leprechaun in the Hood* (2000).

Leprechaun in the Hood may be worse than the fourth entry in the series (which featured, memorably, the leprechaun as a penis-busting alien) because it panders so relentlessly to African-American cultural stereotypes with jokes about rap, weed (“*a friend with weed is a friend indeed*,”) the hood, and so forth. If the culture as depicted in this film accurately reflects African American culture, it is time for an intervention. More likely, this is white Hollywood’s view of the culture, and simply encourages lowest-common-denominator stereotypes. The follow-up movie, *Leprechaun: Back to Tha Hood*, at least had the decency to portray its African American heroes as innately good, honest, and even heroic. Here, the characters are all played for cheap laughs, and there is not one person who seems real. Everyone is a stereotype. Fortunately, one of the film’s lead actors, Anthony Montgomery, would find a better, more optimistic role as a regular on *Star Trek: Enterprise* from 2001 to 2005 playing Ensign Mayweather, the helmsman of the first starship to carry the famous name, Enterprise. He didn’t always have a lot to do on the program, over its four-year run, but at least Mayweather was a positive role model. The same can’t be said for any of the leads in *Leprechaun in the Hood*. All the characters here are obsessed with money, drugs, and sex, to the exclusion of everything else.

There are two kinds of *Leprechaun* films in the series. There are the ones that are played relatively straight, as horror, but no great shakes in that regard. The first film, and *Back to Tha Hood* fit into that category. And then there are camp fests like the one in space, and this film. The latter type features bad jokes and feel like an insult to the intelligence. Thus, I suppose I’m on record as preferring the other type of entry, the one that at least tries to tell a coherent story with heroic characters and tries to be scary.

During his climactic rap, the Leprechaun notes, “*I’m so bad, I’m good*.” In this film, and in most of his films, the Leprechaun’s so bad, he’s just plain bad. This is a movie with a creative title, and nothing more, perfect for attracting amused video store patrons, but terrible at weaving a worthwhile narrative.

Lost Souls * ½

Critical Reception

“A little early for Halloween but right on time for Friday the 13th comes Janusz Kaminski’s spiritual horror fiasco, *Lost Souls*. Be warned: If you see it, you will lose your money. Kaminski is a two-time Oscar-winning cinematographer (*Schindler’s List*, *Saving Private Ryan*) trying his hand at directing. In making the leap, he jostled loose some of his senses. His first feature is so thoroughly awful, it isn’t even interesting to look at. Rarely is a movie more out of sync with an audience. There isn’t a second of humor, irony or lightheartedness in *Lost Souls*, yet there’s likely to be plenty of laughter awaiting it.”—Jack Mathews, *The New York Daily News*: “The Devil Made ’Em Make *Lost Souls*,” October 13, 2000, page 62.

“Working with lenser Mauro Fiore (a Kaminski collaborator on six films) and Production Designer Garreth Stover, Kaminski has created a dark, destabilized universe that was apparently inspired by the paintings of Francis Bacon. With its desaturated color palette and grainy film stock, *Lost Souls* boasts a nontraditional look: It has neither the slick, glossy veneer of a commercial thriller nor the ultra-low-budget, pseudo-docu feel of a *Blair Witch Project*. Camerawork mostly hews to the traditional—i.e., slowly accelerating tracking shots and distorted lenses that point to a dangerous unseen presence. Kaczmarek’s score hits all the expected scary notes, even if, at times, a bit too heavily.”—Lael Lowenstein, *Variety*, October 9–15, 2000 page 22.

“*Lost Souls* possesses the art and craft of a good movie, but not the story. For a thriller about demonic possession and the birth of the Antichrist, it’s curiously flat. Strange, how a trashy satanic movie like *End of Days* is filled with a fearful intensity, while this ambitious stab at the subject seems to lack all conviction. All through the movie I found myself thinking about how well it was photographed. Not a good sign.”—Roger Ebert, *Daily Breeze*: “*Lost Souls* stays lost in flat thriller,” October 13, 2000, page K6.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Winona Ryder (Maya Larkin); Ben Chaplin (Peter Kelson); Sarah Wynter (Claire Van Owen); Philip

Baker Hall (Father James); John Hurt (Father Lareaux); Elias Koteas (John Townsend); John Beasley (Mike Smythe); John Diehl (Henry Birdson); Paul Kleinman (Paramedic); Robert Clendenin (Mental Patient); Oliver Clark (Mr. Silberman); Michael Mantell (Kleiman); Brad Greenquist (George Viznik); Ming Lo (Michael Kim).

CREW: New Line Cinema and Prufrock Pictures present *Lost Souls*. Casting: Mindy Marin. Production Designer: Garreth Stover. Costume Designer: Jill Ohanneson. Special Effects: Stan Winston Studio, Cinesite. Music: Jan A.P. Kaczmarek. Director of Photography: Mauro Fiore. Film Editors: Anne Goursaud, Andrew Mondschein. Producers: Meg Ryan, Nina R. Sadowsky. Executive Producers: Michael De Luca, Pierce Gardner, Donna Langley, Betsy Stahl. Story by: Pierce Gardner, Betsy Stahl. Screenplay by: Pierce Gardner. Directed by: Janusz Kaminski. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young woman named Maya (Ryder) is allied with the Catholic Church and works to solve a mystery involving a possessed mental patient and a true crime author, Peter Kelson (Chaplin), also investigating him. As Maya and Peter work closely to ferret out the puzzle, Maya comes to believe that dark forces are at work, and that Satan will soon take human form, Kelson's form, specifically. Maya and Kelson figure out the precise time and date the transition will occur, and the clock will turn "666," but now must decide how to act to prevent the ascension of evil.

COMMENTARY: Like the similarly themed *Bless the Child*, *Lost Souls* takes a slightly-past-her-prime "A" list female movie star (Winona Ryder instead of Kim Basinger), and lands her in a religious horror film that functions, basically as a rejection of science and rationality and as an affirmation of faith and belief. In this case, Ryder plays Maya Larkin, a woman who comes to realize that a man of science and rationality is in line to become, literally, Satan himself, without her ministrations.



Not *The Exorcist*, but a bad imitation. Winona Ryder levitates in *Lost Souls* (2000).

In *Lost Souls*, Kelson's rational viewpoint is roundly rejected for a more black-and-white one. Kelson, the author of such true crime books as *Vicious Intent*, has written that "*the closer you get to evil, the less evil it seems.*" But Maya has no time for such relativism and comes to understand that anti-God forces are gathering and have picked a non-believer (of course) so as to hatch their evil schemes. Paul's Dad, a math professor, was another non-believer and also a pawn in the Satanic conspiracy and was certified by the Church as having been officially possessed. Peter then learns his whole life of STEM pursuits is just a treacherous lie. He was never baptized, he was born of incest, and most importantly, he has no faith, all factors which make him susceptible to possession. Or, as he is informed bluntly: "*You are about to become the Anti-Christ.*"

Well-filmed and well-acted, *Lost Souls* is nonetheless poorly thought-out hokum, another example of Hollywood horror pandering to the under-educated masses. Rarely in movie history, one might notice, is a person of religion found to be wrong, and learn that science and medicine are correct, not bogus. It's always the other way around. A person who believes in science or Math is always proven wrong and bad for trusting science and facts. The hero in these films is almost always a woman, too, which again, plays to gender stereotypes about religious belief.

The problem in films like *Lost Souls* (and also even better-made efforts, such as *Frailty*), is that the film actually sets a kind of dangerous precedent for audiences. Consider, in *Lost Souls*, Kelson is destined to turn into the Devil himself at 4:55 p.m. of the appointed day. He must be killed before that transition occurs. But if he is killed before that transition occurs, then it cannot be proven, empirically, that he is actually the Devil. He is being killed on one (religious) person's subjective judgment that he will become the Devil. In other words, the person is to be murdered before empirical evidence of their evil-ness can be gathered and religious faith is the excuse or justification for that murder. Accordingly, as the clock turns 4:55 p.m. in *Lost Souls*, Maya kills Peter. She does this of her own volition, but also at his urging because he has come to believe too. Of course, society would fall apart if people went around killing each other based on religious belief, wouldn't it?

Again, this is not a small matter in the 2000s, an era when religious zealotry was behind mass murder in the form of the 9/11 attacks. Religious belief and values also scuttled stem cell research in the United States. In the 2000s, religious belief spilled into the public square in many insidious ways, including W's faith-based initiatives. But the problem was, and remains, how can religion, and belief in a hazy superior being figure be used as evidence to make good decisions in a reality-based world? Everyone has a different understanding of belief and religion. Just consider for a moment how many different Christian denominations there are in just one country. For people to kill other people based on their personal reading of the Bible, or the Koran, or *Battlefield Earth*, is a recipe for anarchy. Maya's decision makes sense, for certain, in the universe of *Lost Souls*, but the message nonetheless seems irresponsible in light of the world around the film. Religious horror films have a format and a set of conventions all their own, the (usually) female protagonist (*Bless the Children*, *The Calling*, *Lost Souls*, *The Reaping*), a storyline affirming faith and a religious universal order, and of course, darkness rising. Perhaps it is useless to complain about these conventions but if there were ever a time to complain about them, it would have been in the 2000s the age that spawned anti-vaxxers, flat-earthers, and other "faith based" thinking at the expense of logic, rationality, and science.

All that established, Ryder is a likeable lead, and the film is impressively lit and photographed. It's just that the rest is ill-advised hooey.

Pitch Black (2000) * * *

Critical Reception

"Shot in the Queensland, Australia, outback, *Pitch Black* is as relentlessly efficient as it is mechanical, and its steadfast craftsmanship may make it acceptable to die-hard sci-fi fans. Its appeal, however, is limited because

of its blah characters—with the exception of Riddick—and almost total absence of humor.”—Kevin Thomas, *The Los Angeles Times*: “*Pitch Black* Blasts into Old Frontiers,” February 18, 2000, page F18.

“*Pitch Black* features some lovingly crafted effects—notably Director of Photography David Eggby’s bleached colour palette—and some vivid characterisation. There’s an intriguing moral ambiguity, for instance, which surrounds convicted murderer Riddick. With his opaque, inscrutable eyes (Riddick has enhanced night vision), gravely intonation and reluctance to look after anyone but himself, Vin Diesel’s Riddick puts you in mind of the lone, ungiving figures of films by Sam Peckinpah and Sergio Leone. Though some sexual frisson between this consummate outsider and Fry is introduced. Twohy refuses to soften Riddick’s hardened exterior, thereby imbuing this predictable plot turn with an uneasy charm of its own.”—Daniel Etherington, *Sight and Sound*, August 2000, pages 54–55.

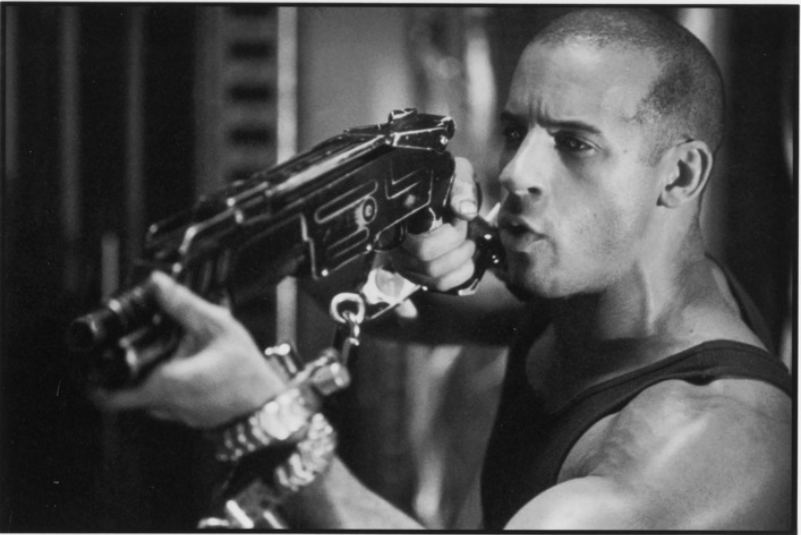
“It’s in Jack’s perspective (which, admittedly, doesn’t get much play) that *Pitch Black* offers some shrewd meta-commentary on the relations between celebrity and gender expectations, and adults and kids, as well as the hard-to-come-by faith that allows any of these cultural strands to come together, ever. Flawed and ambitious, *Pitch Black*’s murky challenge to SF-action heroic conventions is its most redeeming feature.”—Cynthia Fuchs, *Nitrate Online*, February 25, 2000.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Vin Diesel (Richard B. Riddick); Radha Mitchell (Carolyn Fry); Cole Hauser (William J. Johns); Keith David (Abu “Imam” al-Walid); Lewis Fitz-Gerald (Paris P. Ogilvie); Claudia Black (Sharon Montgomery); Rhiana Griffith (Jack); John Moore (John Ezekiel); Simon Burke (Greg Owens); Les Chantry (Suleiman); Sam Sari (Hassan); Firass Dirani (Ali); Ric Anderson (Stranger); Vic Wilson (Captain); Angela Moore (Dead Crew Member).

CREW: USA Films, Gramercy Pictures, Polygram Filmed Entertainment and Interscope Communications presents *Pitch Black*. Music: Graeme Revell. Production Designer: Grace Walker. Costume Designer: Anna Borghesi. Special Effects: Double Negative, Hunter/Gratzner Industries, John Cox’s Creature Workshop, The Chandler Group, The Magic Camera Company, New Deal Studios, Patrick Tatopoulos Design, The Visual Effects Company. Music: Graeme Revell. Director of Photography: David Eggby, Film Editor: Rick Shaine. Producer: Tom Engelman. Executive Producers: Ted Field, Scott Kroopf, Tony Winley. Story by: Jim Wheat, Ken Wheat. Written by: Jim Wheat, Ken Wheat, David Twohy. Directed by: David Twohy. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 109 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The *Hunter-Gratzner*, a deep space freighter carrying crew and roughly forty passengers in stasis, is damaged when the ship passes through a comet’s tail. The ship’s docking pilot, Caroline Fry (Mitchell), panics upon awaking, and nearly jettisons the passenger module before her co-pilot, Owens (Burke), prevents her from doing so. Instead, Fry manages a messy landing on a barren planet. Although the ship is pulped, a handful of passengers survive the ordeal. One of those survivors is Richard B. Riddick (Diesel), a dangerous criminal traveling in the custody of (an apparent) police officer named Johns (Cole Hauser). Riddick warns the crash survivors—including an Imam (Keith David), an impressionable boy, Jack (Rhiana Griffith), a tough-as-nails miner (Claudia Black), and an antiques dealer (Lewis Fitzgerald)—that they have greater problems to concern themselves with than his murderous disposition. His advice soon proves accurate. Fry and the others learn that the planet—*bathed in the light of three suns*—is about to undergo a once-every-two-decades eclipse that will render the entire surface dark for the foreseeable future. Worse, ferocious winged alien carnivores will break free from subterranean slumber when the eclipse begins. And these predators are very, very hungry. Fortunately, there is a possible escape route. An abandoned geology station and an escape skiff are stationed across a valley of very large animal carcasses. When the lights go out, Fry recruits Riddick—who can see in the dark thanks to an ocular “shine” job—to lead them on a pilgrimage to salvation.



Terror on an alien world. Two views from Twohy's *Pitch Black* (2000). Top (from left): Imam (Keith David), Jack (Rhiana Griffith) and Fry (Radha Mitchell) follow Riddick's (Vin Diesel's) lead on the nighttime surface. Bottom: Riddick (Diesel) takes up arms against his former captors.

COMMENTARY: David Twohy's *Pitch Black* (2000) is the best John Carpenter movie made by an artist other than John Carpenter. Many of Carpenter's creative obsessions are in full evidence here. Specifically, *Pitch Black* features both the corrupt establishment figure (a "blue eyed devil" called Johns), and the criminal/anti-hero (Riddick) as protagonist audiences are acquainted with from such films as *Escape from New York* (1981) and *Escape from L.A.* (1996). This Twohy film also features a capable "Hawksian" woman (Caroline Fry), much like the one highlighted in *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), as well as the faceless villains we recall from *Assault*, *Prince of Darkness* (1987), and *Ghosts of Mars* (2001). Only this time, the dangerous swarm isn't human in nature, but rather a horde of piranhas-of-the-air that attack and kill without relent. John Carpenter also frequently contextualizes his films as Westerns, albeit ones re-framed in urban, futuristic or horror settings. Vis-à-vis *Pitch Black*, no less an authority than the late Roger Ebert observed in his review that, similarly, "*most of the plot could be ported into a*

Western.”

But where Ebert saw this descriptor of “Western” as a signifier of *Pitch Black*’s dearth of imagination, it might be viewed as representative of Twohy’s dedicated effort to keep the film squarely in the tradition and spirit of Carpenter’s beloved oeuvre, as well as the cherished tradition of several decades of science fiction B movies in general (think: *Moon Zero Two* [1969], *Battle Beyond the Stars* [1980], *Outland* [1981] or even *Serenity* [2005]). The West and Outer Space are, after all, both “untamed” frontiers. Carpenter films are remakes of Howard Hawks Westerns, in many cases, so *Pitch Black* honors that tradition in terms of milieu as well.

Beyond the abundant similarities to Carpenter’s film canon, *Pitch Black* concerns the true, raw “exposed” nature of the human animal, and debate the very nature of *evil* itself. Vin Diesel’s Richard B. Riddick is a man who is frequently described as “evil” in Twohy’s films, though he does not possess qualities typically regarded as evil by many viewers. Riddick is not ignorant, for one thing (and ignorance is a prerequisite for evil). More significantly, Riddick does not lack *for a governing moral or ethical code*. Evil might best be defined as the absence of just such a personal code. Rather, Riddick merely does what he must to survive, and he’ll help you survive too ... just so long as you don’t expect too much by way of handholding, and he doesn’t have to go back over old territory to get you. *Pitch Black* also makes plain that although some people may view the anti-hero Riddick as a criminal or a kind of caveman throw-back, he does not possess many of the deceitful traits of “modern” or “civilized” man. This absence of modern vice is one quality that differentiates him from the film’s other characters.



The cast of *Pitch Black*. Top left to bottom right: Vin Diesel, Radha Mitchell, Cole Hauser, Keith David and Claudia Black.

Pitch Black is a stirring and effective cinematic work in terms of action, horror and science fiction, with solid creature effects, and impressive production design, yet the film thrives primarily because of Vin Diesel's central performance, and the questions that the Riddick character raises about the nature of the human animal. To misquote Woody Allen, the Riddick the audience meets as *Pitch Black* opens would never be part of any species that would have him as a member. He is not only a Carpenter-esque anti-hero, but an outsider in terms of the Establishment. Yet importantly, Riddick's anti-social qualities are directly addressed in the film, and with surprising, unexpected results. In the final analysis, what makes *Pitch Black* so emotionally satisfying a ride is that Riddick indeed finds a spiritual apotheosis that even he isn't actively seeking. The revelation that Riddick experiences about himself—and *his nature*—in the film's final act proves the very quality that elevates *Pitch Black* beyond the "imitating John Carpenter"—stage of filmmaking. So, *Pitch Black* is not simply Carpenter-esque. Instead, it re-visits and re-examines the long-standing Carpenter thematic ethos, and then expands that philosophy in a new, original, and fascinating direction. Upon such innovations, franchises can be built. Here, Riddick realizes he is not separate from the human race, but part of it.

Set in a far future age of technological wonders such as deep space travel and suspended animation, *Pitch Black* establishes a very intriguing contrast between Riddick and his fellow man. As the film opens, Riddick narrates from *cryo-sleep*. He notifies the audience that the human brain normally shuts down in such stasis, save for the primitive or "*animal side*." "*No wonder, I'm still awake*," he quips. This is a vital distinction. Riddick is identified from square one in *Pitch Black* as a throw-back, as an "animal" compared to civilized man. And while he is considered dangerous, Riddick possesses none of the vices of "modern" humanity. He isn't a creature of the film's present, but man's uncivilized past. By contrast, the other survivors are very "human" in terms of foibles. Fry experiences a bout of panic and cowardice, and nearly kills all her shipmates before overcoming it. Johns is a Morphine-addicted, deceitful man who lies about his true nature and position. Jack also hides behind a lie (about his/her gender). The miner, Sharon, meanwhile, beats Riddick viciously with no evidence of his guilt or complicity in another man's death (leading us back to the evil of acting from ignorance). The Antiquities Dealer is flawed and base too: caustic, cynical and alcoholic. He is more concerned with *what things cost* than with the lives of the people around him.

And the Imam? We'll get to him momentarily.

How ironic that Riddick is considered "evil" by his fellow man when the other characters in *Pitch Black* so clearly showcase several aspects of evil. Instead, Riddick is evil only in the sense that the devouring flying piranhas are evil: *he acts according to his biological nature, and his instincts*. His animal brand of viciousness seems much more innocuous than the flaws and vices seen in the "civilized" characters with whom he interacts. The point is that in a situation involving life and death, and survival of the fittest the "primitive" (Riddick) is equipped to survive tumult, whereas the more evolved characters, with their more "advanced" foibles are not. But *Pitch Black* is a clever endeavor because the film's final act pulls the carpet out from under Riddick, and out from under the audience too. It turns out this whole "arena" has not been about survival of the fittest at all, but something else entirely. Fry, in her effort to redeem herself (for her cowardice), calls out Riddick for believing that survival is paramount. She shames him and makes him see that the real game is not survival, but *how* one survives. She shows him a higher ideal, and she acts on that ideal ... *for him*. Fry gives up her life in the effort to save Riddick, and her action—*placing his life* above her own—makes Riddick grow, whether he wants to or not.

"*Not for me!*" Riddick shouts with indignation, an exclamation suggesting that he would rather die an animal than live by the grace of another person's sacrifice. But now Riddick can't do that. He must *earn* the days Fry has given him back. There's a Christian or spiritual aspect to this apotheosis, to this reckoning in the film, and one worthy of examination. According to Scripture, Christ "*died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves*," and these words, indeed, are a mirror for Fry's act of sacrifice. Her death forces Riddick to live for something beyond mere survival, beyond mere self-interest. This point is made clear in the film's closing dialogue, wherein Riddick is asked what the survivors should say if police ask them what happened to the criminal on the planet surface. "*Tell 'em*

Riddick's dead. He died somewhere on that planet," he declares.

This is not Riddick being cute or witty. This is not Riddick playing with words. This is *truth*. The Riddick that was before is gone. The Riddick that Fry's sacrifice gave birth to in his stead is the one who pilots the skiff to the stars. He is changed by his experience, and that is the very last thing even Riddick himself would have expected. From a certain, overarching perspective, *Pitch Black* is a very spiritual journey, one in which a man falls from the Heavens, reckons with Hell and demons on the planet surface, finds himself and his faith, and returns to the stars "re-born." A less spiritual way to gaze at the film involves an old bromide about *character*. You've heard it a million times and it goes: "character is what you have when no one is watching you." *Pitch Black* modifies that idea. Character is what you have in the dark, when no one *can see you*.

The whole movie—in a world of pitch black—is about who really possesses "human" character, and who does not. In the end, Johns doesn't have good character, but Riddick surely does. The planet surface may be bathed in "*lasting darkness*" but at the end of the film, a new Riddick emerges to leave that darkness behind. The part of him that "*wants to rejoin the human race*," in Fry's words, finds outlet. Visually, the audience sees this when Riddick brings light to the planet surface—and the *photo-phobic monsters*—with the ship's skiff.

Let there be light?

All kidding aside, *Pitch Black* is a deeply spiritual film, even down to its subplots. In particular, the Imam's story—of *losing three adopted sons one after the other*—mirrors the Book of Job. The Imam loses one boy after the other in short, devastating order, and must—like Job before him—wonder why the righteous are made to suffer. The answer is that though the Imam prays and shows all the requisite *outward* signs of faith, he—like his modern brethren—is flawed, at least until he loses everything. He is one of the people, after all, who counsels Fry not to save Riddick, but to leave the planet without him. The trials that the Imam undergoes—reflective of Job's—suggest that he must transcend from being superficially righteous to legitimately so. As a sidebar here, it should be noted that the Imam is played by Keith David, a John Carpenter regular who appeared in *The Thing* (1982) and *They Live* (1988). He is an actor of powerful voice, and imposing physicality, and is often utilized in Carpenter films as a man who is worthy of great respect, even from the central protagonist. That is ultimately the Imam's role here too.

One of the best scenes in *Pitch Black* involves Riddick and the Imam discussing faith and God. The Imam preaches belief at a time of doubt and crisis, but Riddick turns the value of belief around on the man of God. He believes all right, but Riddick hates God for making his life what it is. It's a dark moment, but an appropriate "low point" for Riddick before he is re-born at the denouement, following Fry's sacrifice. Also, it's fascinating to see, how, pre-9/11, the Islamic faith could be interpreted as positive and worthwhile (and supportive in times of grief), without any connection to terrorism or radicalism.

This review commenced with a comparison of *Pitch Black* to the John Carpenter film canon. The Carpenter films often climax with the hero reinforcing his own established view of authority and civilization. Snake plunges the world into darkness (twice, really...) Nada destroys the alien signal in *They Live*, and so forth. But Riddick in *Pitch Black*—the *Carpenter-ian anti-hero*—gets thrown the curve-ball of a redemption he didn't want and didn't seek. He is forced to embrace the idea that he had it all wrong, and that his previous worldview may have been limited. Fry forced him to grow. This "evolutionary" aspect of *Pitch Black* is commendable because it plays as the first step of Riddick's heroic journey across a film trilogy and allows for the character to grow and develop through his ensuing cinematic adventures. But the redemption angle is also valuable because it utilizes Carpenter's canon as a basis for its ideas, and then spins them off in a new and unexpected direction.

LEGACY: David Twohy and Vin Diesel's Riddick returned in the non-horror "franchise-building" 2004 epic, *Chronicles of Riddick*, and in a return to the horror genre, in 2016's *Riddick*.

Psycho Beach Party * 1/2

Critical Reception

“...director Robert Lee King ultimately never gets beyond self-conscious gee-whiz spoofing and the film stalls in a sitcom style in which the dialogue comes in sputters and pauses, as if waiting for the laugh track to kick in. A minor cult film with inspired elements but poor direction...”—S. Axmaker, *The Video Librarian*, November 1, 2015.

“Robert Lee King’s direction offers noticeably less wattage than Busch’s savvy, more sharply focused writing. Still, *Psycho Beach Party* aims to win you over rather than bowl you over, and it succeeds with flamboyant aplomb. At many points, the film’s fun and games with the demon butcher of Malibu Beach are more entertaining than the stuff it’s parodying. Annette and Frankie never had it so bad.”—Jay Carr, *The Boston Globe*: “A Little Hitchcock and Some Good ‘Psycho’ Fun at the Beach,” September 1, 2000, page C4.

“A cult movie without, so far at least, a cult, *Psycho Beach Party* is an erratically entertaining dual parody of two justly maligned Hollywood genres: surf movies and slasher flicks. There is also a goofy gay subtext and a nod or two to classic psychological thrillers. That’s a lot of baggage to be carried by one intentionally silly little plot—‘Gidget’ meets ‘Halloween’ meets John Waters meets Alfred Hitchcock. All too often, the movie is so busy toting all those satirical loads and making sure the boom mike can be seen at the top of the screen, that it forgets to supply enough laughs.”—Harper Barnes, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*: “Send-up Throws Darts at Stock Hollywood Genres,” December 2, 2000, page 39.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Lauren Ambrose (Florence); Thomas Gibson (Kanaka); Nicholas Brendon (Starcatt); Kimberly Davies (Bettina); Matt Keeslar (Lars); Amy Adams (Marvel Ann); Channon Roe (Wedge); David Chokachi (Edi); Richard Fancy (Doctor); Charles Busch (Captain Monica Stark).

CREW: Strand Releasing, New Oz Productions and Red Horse Films Present a Robert Lee King Film. Casting: Laura Schiff. Music: Ben Vaughn. Film Editor: Suzanne Hines. Director of Photography: Arturo Smith. Executive Producer: John Hall. Written by: Charles Busch. Directed by: Robert Lee King. M.P.A.A Rating: NR. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Following a murder at the drive-in, a girl named Florence (Ambrose) goes in search of the Great Kanaka (Gibson), a surfing guru, to teach her to be one of the boys and learn the sport of surfing. Alas, Florence is schizophrenic and has multiple personalities. This fact impacts the murder investigation, especially as the boys she surfs with begin dropping dead.

COMMENTARY: In an effort to be complete, this film adaptation of the stage play of the same title is included in this text, although it is more accurately catalogued as comedy-horror than as horror-comedy. On either front, the film is pretty terrible, however, failing to elicit laughs or screams. The idea of parodying 1960s beach movies and horror movies is a good one, but the film feels uncomfortably theatrical and over-the-top.

One can only presume the effort here involved camping it up, but the galvanizing idea behind camp is for everything to be played so seriously, it’s funny. Here, the performances are so scattershot and off the mark that the only horror the audience will feel comes in the reckoning with the wildly inconsistent performances and tones involved in the production. The film feels like it is arch and superior for treating the material as silly, but this isn’t material even good as camp.

Some jokes work, like the idea of two macho surfers boasting a gay attraction for each other, but not realizing it at first ... even as they squirt oil on each other and wrestle suggestively in the sand together. But the bad rear projection surfing, the black and white 1950s horror movie parody (of *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman*) and other material just fall flat. The film’s high point is likely the opening credits, with a great 1960s style dance featured. It’s all downhill from there.

Psycho Beach Party features a great young cast that includes Amy Adams, Matt Keeslar, and Nicholas Brendon, but boy are they adrift in this pretentious mess. The lines they read may seem appropriate to the page, or stage, but not in a movie, where they come across as horribly stilted and

uncomfortable. The film doesn't boast a bad reputation and that may be because one of the core themes—a murderer murdering those who are “different,”—involves tolerance. The idea of demonstrating how antiquated the Frankie Avalon beach movies or the *Gidget* films look now, in light of current awareness of the LGBTQ+ journey is one with real power and value. In other words, most folks will want to like this movie for the pro-social point of view it espouses. But a movie is judged not on what it is about, but “how” it is about that subject, to paraphrase the late, great Roger Ebert. *Psycho Beach Party* attempts to juxtapose the “innocence” (really patriarchal, white male viewpoint) of the parodied material, with a 21st-century knowledge of how parochial those films truly were.

Point taken, and approved, but the film is executed in a way utterly without grace, charm or style.

The St. Francisville Experiment (DTV) ★

Cast & Crew

CAST: Ryan Larson (Himself); Madison Charap (Herself); Paul Baldini (Tim Thompson); Paul Salamoff (Producer); Ava Jones (Voodoo Priestess); Katherine Smith (Paranormal Expert).

CREW: Multicom Entertainment Group Inc., presents *The St. Francisville Experiment*. Director of Photography: Tim Baldini. Film Editor: Jeff Bradley, Tom Vater. Producers: Paul Salamoff, Dane Scanlon, Garry Schmoeller. Directed by: Ted Nicolou. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 74 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Four non-professionals—a psychic named Madison (Charap), a photographer (Thompson), a paranormal expert (Scanlon), and a ghost hunter, Paul (Ryan)—are challenged to spend an entire night in the renowned haunted mansion in St. Francisville, Louisiana. That region is renowned for a cluster of historic haunted homes from the period of the American Civil War and slavery. A voodoo priestess (Jones) warns the explorers to “expect a heaviness inside the house, and that some dark energies may attach themselves” to the visitors. The foursome enters the home and conducts a séance, but are soon confronted with mysterious, and maleficent supernatural forces.

COMMENTARY: *The St. Francisville Experiment* is one of the first found-footage releases to arrive in the wake of the low-budget, independent mega-hit, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Unfortunately, this movie seems to have learned all the wrong lessons from that great horror film. Like *The Blair Witch Project*, *The St. Francisville Experimental* is cheap, features unknown actors, and adopts the P.O.V. camera as its central modus operandi, thus discounting the need for much work in terms of creating an original soundtrack, or post-production editing. But the performers in *The St. Francisville Experiment* can't act, and the filmmakers “cheat” the angles in more than one scene. Scenes here go on endlessly, without direction, and the film never generates much in terms of scares or suspense. In short, through its artless-ness, *The St. Francisville Experiment* proves just how well-made *The Blair Witch Project* actually is.

The actors in *The St. Francisville Experiment* are terrible, but one senses that they are pretty much on their own, creatively, and thus swimming without paddles. The film's scenes are shapeless and feel “un-directed,” if it can be phrased that way. Essentially, each actor tries to direct from within the action, repeating what they deem to be crucial information or directing the other actors within the moment so as to get to the next scene, and the next room to explore in the haunted house. The psychic character, for instance, keeps hammering home, in every scene, that the explorers are enveloped in a protective “white light.” That observation occurs dozens of times, as the movie continues. Likewise, the information that one character is afraid of tight spaces gets repeated again and again, in the hopes that, in the final cut, it will prove significant to the action, and to character development. Sometimes, the actors even giggle and

break character.

Overlapping dialogue is difficult to do well, of course, and the actors here talk endlessly, and over each other, so that it is not always easy to make out what is said. Cinéma vérité is one thing, amateurism is something else. The sound is bad too, to go along with the bad performances.

The sense of amateurism extends to the camera work. The cameras are supposed to be held by the characters in the drama, but in some cases the angles shown are physically impossible given the position of the performers in-frame. There is a séance scene for example, wherein the camera captures a long shot, far away from all the participants. All the participants are on-screen, however, and no tripod is ever seen coming into the house. Who's filming this scene?

At one point in the action, a character notes that she feels more afraid of her "*own fears than anything else*," and that's a potent observation as not much viewers would deem scary really occurs in the film. One scene in the attic, in the presence of what seems an angry spirit, gets closest, perhaps, as a chair is tossed across the room, with no visible source for the action. Beyond the lack of scares, the movie never quite nails its basic premise. Are the characters entering the house as part of a reality show? A movie documentary? They are given missions to complete (such as taking temperature readings of various rooms), and told they must stay inside the whole night, but again this concept goes nowhere and is abandoned about mid-way through. Who sets the rules? Why are the characters competing? What's the reward?

Found footage movies have very quickly developed their own language, and own set of visual and narrative rules. Films such as *REC* and *Cloverfield* demonstrate how well they succeed when that happens. *The St. Francisville Experiment* sits at the opposite end of that spectrum. It looks and plays like a clueless cash grab in the wake of *The Blair Witch Project*'s unexpected success.

Scream 3 ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"By now *Scream* has less to do with horror than with soap opera. *Scream 3* qualifies as a melodrama with bloodshed, in-jokes and purposefully overstated performances that can be fun. Many of the characters are recurring figures from a series that, if we're to believe *Scream 3*, has reached its end. Craven leaves the door slightly ajar for more movies, but one hopes that.... Neve Campbell has screamed her last scream."—Robert Stein, *Daily Mercury*: "*Scream 3*: much louder," February 2000, page B6.

"Film snobs like to dismiss slasher savant Wes Craven and his gory spectacles as cheap and déclassé. I have strong proof to the contrary, that Craven is indeed a wily genius. The evidence arrives in *Scream 3*—the final chapter of the genre-flipping franchise—when Craven bumps off Jenny McCarthy with extreme measures and delicious haste. McCarthy, the former MTV bimbo, has two scenes, and then ... bye, bye. It's not the only stroke of sage judgment and impressive wit in *Scream 3*, amusing, entertaining junk directed by Craven and written by Ehren Kruger ('Arlington Road') using characters created by Kevin Williamson.... *Scream 3* is funnier than its predecessors. Craven and a frisky cast—including survivors Neve Campbell and David Arquette, and fresh meat Patrick Dempsey and a delectably vampy Parker Posey—amplify the humor, and indeed the movie frequently plunges into flat out parody."—Chris Garcia, *Austin American Statesman*: "*Scream* series ends with another round of bloody good fun." February 4, 2000, page E1.

"A retread instead of a sequel. The script by Ehren Kruger feels like a hack job. The opening lacks any suspense (No offense to Liev Schreiber's performance, but we're supposed to care what happens to cocky Cotton Weary all the sudden?), the characters are flat, the ending makes zero sense. However, as soon as Neve Campbell walks into the police station, it's like returning home to your sister. Campbell has always been the soul of the franchise, and she brings weight to the role. Side Note: Someone eventually should cut around Parker Posey's hilarious performance, add in some outtakes, and release it as a star vehicle for her. Why is one of the funniest women in film not a humongous star?!"—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Neve Campbell (Sidney Prescott); Courteney Cox Arquette (Gale Weathers); David Arquette (Dewey); Liev Schreiber (Cotton Weary); Patrick Dempsey (Mark Kincaid); Scott Foley (Roman Bridger); Lance Henriksen (John Milton); Matt Keesler (Tom Prinze); Jenny McCarthy (Sarah Darling); Parker Posey (Jennifer Jolie); Jamie Kennedy (Randy Meeks); Carrie Fisher (Bianca); Patrick Warburton (Steven Stone).

CREW: Dimension Films, Konrad Pictures, Craven-Maddalena Films and Miramax presents *Scream 3*. Casting: Lisa Beach. Production Designer: Bruce Alan Miller. Costume Designer: Abigail Murray. Special Effects: Pixel Magic, Fantasy II Film Effects, Digiscope. Music: Marco Beltrami. Director of Photography: Peter Demin. Film Editor: Patrick Lussier. Producers: Cathy Konrad, Marianne Maddalena, Kevin Williamson. Executive Producers: Cary Granat, Andrew Rona, Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein. Based on characters created by: Ehren Kruger. Written by: Kevin Williamson. Directed by: Wes Craven. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 116 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Cotton Weary (Schreiber), now a talk show host, is murdered by Ghostface, setting off a new rash of brutal murders. The masked slasher is desperate to find Sidney Prescott (Campbell), who has gone into hiding and is working from her home as a crisis counselor under the name Laura. Meanwhile, *Stab 3*, the movie franchise based on the Gale Weathers (Cox) book and the Woodsboro Murders, is being produced at Sunset Studios. Dewey (Arquette), Sid and Gale attempt to stop Ghostface as he murders the actors in the order that their characters die in the film. As they delve deeper, Dewey, Sid and Gale learn that this iteration of Ghostface is "*all about going back to the beginning*," and uncovering secrets from Sidney's unexcavated past, and, in particular her mother's

history, which surprisingly, leads right back to Hollywood.

COMMENTARY: The meta, neo-slasher *Scream* series, which, arguably single-handedly, revived the horror film genre in 1996, returns in this effort that saves its sharpest stabs for Hollywood itself. The film reunites the cast of the earlier *Scream* efforts, and once more puts horror maestro and legend Wes Craven at the helm. As one might expect, the film proves itself sharp as a knife itself, and caustically funny too. The organizing principle this time is “*the concluding chapter of a trilogy*.” In particular, the film is all about going back to the beginning and presenting a backstory that causes the viewer to re-parse the earlier entries in a new light. This material is all clever, insightful and observant about horror movies, but the film’s other track is perhaps even stronger: a general indictment of Hollywood which is described in the dialogue as “*not the city for innocence*.”

Finally, however, despite the barbs at Hollywood and the observations about trilogies (and the final chapter of trilogies, specifically), for the first time something doesn’t quite seem fresh. *Scream 3* is by no means a disaster or a bad film, yet it lacks, for all its intelligence, the freshness and passion evident in the first two entries. Even counting the fourth entry, which was released in 2011, *Scream 3* is probably the weakest film in the franchise thus far.



Ready for their close-ups! Gale Weathers (Courteney Cox Arquette) and Deputy Dewey (David Arquette) react in fear to Ghostface's latest murder in *Scream 3* (2000).

The most delightful sequence, perhaps, in *Scream 3*, resurrections Randy, the character played by Jamie Kennedy. The greatest mistake of the franchise, perhaps, was the killing off of this character in *Scream 2* (1997). Randy is the franchise's knowledgeable film geek, but also the funny, exposition king, who can (amusingly) contextualize every plot point in terms of horror movies and their conventions or tropes. Randy gets brought back for a short scene, which he recorded on video tape, warning his friends about what they should expect from the next series of Ghostface murders. Randy explains that the concluding chapter of a trilogy is all about going back to the beginning. His rules are that the killer is superhuman, anyone, including main characters can die, and that the past is not at rest.

That last rule applies specifically to a previously unknown chapter in the life of Maureen Prescott, Sid's mother. She went to Hollywood as a young woman, her head filled with dreams of stardom. Instead, she was raped at a party in the 1970s, and a pregnancy resulted. This means that Sid has a half-brother, Roman (Foley). Roman is now a director, but he has been directing, since the beginning, the murders of Ghostface. The events of *Scream* are ret-conned to suggest that Billy and Stu had another accomplice, Roman himself, and that he was acting there as their director, essentially.

Randy's observations about trilogies and concluding chapters seems on point, and clever, though nothing here is as memorable as his description in *Scream 2* (1997) for the rules of sequels, including "carnage candy" (bigger, more elaborate deaths scenes). Indeed, *Scream 3*'s makers would rather focus, perhaps wisely, on skewering Tinsel Town. The film's dialogue describes it as a place "full of criminals who are still working," and given what the public knows now about the alleged behavior of Hollywood personalities such as Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, and even directors Brett Ratner and Bryan Singer, this seems truer than ever in 2020. Here, a super-rich studio executive named Milton, played to perfection by Lance Henriksen, is actually a rapist. And a film director, Roman, is a murderer. Their names bear closer inspection. Historically, John Milton was the author of *Paradise Lost* who coined the famous phrase "Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven." *Scream 3*'s John Milton lives by this proverb, ruling in the Hell of Hollywood, according to his own rules and ethics (or lack thereof). Roman, of course, might be a reference to Roman Polanski, a prominent movie director who some people would no doubt describe as a "criminal" for his alleged drugging and raping of a minor, yet who is "still working." This Roman, in *Scream 3*, is the director of a film, and also the director of the Ghostface murders.

"For me, Hollywood is about death," a police detective, Kincaid (Patrick Dempsey), points out at one point in *Scream 3*, and that observation also contributes to the caustic atmosphere the film creates with such aplomb. People endeavoring to work there are advised to "play the game or go home." The so-called land of dreams is thus compared, in short order in *Scream 3* to death, Hell (via the Milton reference) and lawlessness. *Scream 3* also features more recognizable stars than the previous entries combined, including Jenny McCarthy, Carrie Fisher, and Parker Posey. They are all in the film, in one fashion or another, to skewer Hollywood. The late Carrie Fisher represents a cautionary tale, perhaps, about someone who is brilliant and talented, but whose gifts are wasted by a life of drug use, promoted in the Hollywood lifestyle. Jenny McCarthy plays a dumb-as-a-stump actor who gets work, even though she doesn't really have the capacity to understand the work, or much by way of talent. And Parker Posey proves utterly genius in the film at mocking Courtney Cox's Gale Weathers, taking on a role with a sarcastic dedication that borders on nuts. These Hollywood "personalities" are juxtaposed against Maureen's experience in Hollywood. A young beauty went to find her dreams, and met instead crime, degradation and failure. Are these the choices that Hollywood offers women, *Scream 3* asks. Brilliance succumbing to vice? Stupidity on ascent (in the age, not coincidentally, of reality TV "stars" like Jessica Simpson)? Method acting gone to madness? The promise of stardom a lure only for rape? In charting this territory, *Scream 3* is the darkest of the films. Yet, at the same it scores these points, the screenplay can't find anything meaningful for Neve Campbell's Sidney to do. She is sidelined for long spells, either in hiding in her home, or camping out at the police station.

Something also seems at odd in terms of another creative impulse in the film. Here, there are celebrity cameos from the likes of Jay and Silent Bob (Jason Mewes and Kevin Smith, respectively) and tugs of nostalgia from the Hollywood recreation of sets seen in the original *Scream* (1996). These ideas

suggest a desire to look back at fondness for a great and important horror film, and basically celebrate the return and culmination of the trilogy. Yet, how is one to reckon with these celebratory impulses, at the same time that the narrative takes such deadly and accurate aim at Hollywood and the movie industry? Is this a celebration of all things Hollywood, or straight-up indictment of the way the movie industry works, and protects monsters (because those monsters can make studios money)? *Scream 3* is clever and insightful, but it never reckons with the cognitive dissonance it often displays.

Also, *Scream 3*, largely between the scenes, seems a little tired. The writing is sharp. The direction is sharp. The performances are faultless. But this is the third time that this material, and this approach has been utilized in, basically, a four-year span. One thing that *Scream 3* simply can't accomplish is a restoration of the freshness and surprising nature of the original 1996 effort. Here, for instance, the opening murder of Liev Schreiber's Cotton Weary, can't hold a candle to the opening death scenes of either Drew Barrymore in *Scream* or Jada Pinkett in *Scream 2*. It feels uninspired in a lot of ways. Casey Becker (Barrymore) and Pinkett (Maureen) died in self-contained set-pieces of tremendous imagination. Those scenes were almost movies unto themselves. And as those scenes occurred, audiences didn't know how the characters fit into the larger story. The scenes were stand-alone opportunities for style and suspense. By contrast, audiences are well-acquainted with Cotton Weary at this point, and his role in Sidney's story, so his murder feels like something we expect in the body of the film, not as a bravura starting point.

There is some aspect of *Scream 3* that feels a little like going back to the well once too often, and a bit "too soon," to use a 2000s catchphrase. The film doesn't fail in the cleverness or commentary aspects, but some of the horror aspects don't seem as surprising, fresh, innovative or well-handled as in the past. For example, this movie features a house exploding, and a car chase. These elements feel a bit more generic, and less genre-oriented than one would like, though one could certainly argue that with efforts such as *Blade 2*, *Underworld*, and *Resident Evil*, *Scream 3* was forward-looking to integrate action and horror into one seamless package.

Scream blazed to success for its intelligent approach to horror, its recognition that the horror audience is smart, and its acknowledgment of the old tropes for what they are. That movie set-up those tropes and exploded them humor and aplomb. *Scream 2* took on sequels with its carnage candy rule, but also made a surprisingly intellectual and emotional case about how much drama and arts (theater and film) are needed in society, and by individuals, to cast off trauma. *Scream 3* really gives it to Hollywood on one hand, which makes the film newly relevant and prophetic before the age of #MeToo, and yet can't overcome the fact that the series is now relying on a formula (opening kill, new person behind the mask, etc.). This is one series entry you won't scream over, but might politely cheer, based on its cerebral gamesmanship.

LEGACY: *Scream 4*—taking on reboots, re-imaginations and social media, came along a decade after this sequel in 2011, also directed by Wes Craven. An MTV series based on the saga began airing on MTV in 2015 and lasted at least three seasons. As this book went to presses, a *Scream 5* had been announced with stars Cox, Campbell and Arquette returning to the fold. *Scream 5*, produced after Craven's death, would be the first *Scream* to be directed by someone other than the maestro who gave it life in 1996.

Shadow of the Vampire * * *

Critical Reception

"This is a film that offered so much in its trailer. For any film buff enthralled with Max Schreck from Murnau's classic *Nosferatu*, the idea of a film where it turns out Max is really one of the undead is marvelous, and Willem Dafoe is perfectly cast, with all of the spidery features of Max Schreck before he even needs to act or have some makeup applied. I sympathize with the filmmakers to some degree on this film—with such a great concept, choosing your genre is a critical decision, and that's where I think the film stumbled. The

world probably has enough horror films about vampires, and enough horror comedies that spoof vampires (paging George Hamilton), so the filmmakers likely wrestled with how to thread this particular needle. It's not an effective comedy. It's not an effective horror film. It's not a particularly interesting drama. It tries to be all three—and I remember walking out of the theater saying this film was ... fine. Not good, not great, not terrible, just ... fine. The trailer can be the death of many films, and I think the trailer suggested a film that would be fun. This was not a fun film. I don't know that it ever could have been. I think it would be wonderful if Taika Waititi decided to remake this film—it's not exactly the same thing as *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014)—but I think the tone of that film, combined with this film's high concept, could give us something better. As it stands, *Shadow of the Vampire* was a misfire.”—William Latham, author *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

“A gothic, fun ‘what if?’ horror flick that feels more like a clever school thesis than a fully formed film. Willem DaFoe's Oscar nominated performance is a party unto itself. He smacks his blood-dripped lips like he's been gorging on KFC, not co-stars.”—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: John Malkovich (Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau); Willem Dafoe (Max Schreck); Udo Kier (Albin Grau); Cary Elwes (Fritz Arno Wagner); Catherine McCormack (Greta Schroder); Eddie Izzard (Gustav Von Wangenheim); Aden Gillett (Henrik Galeen); Nicholas Elliot (Paul); Ronan Vibert (Wolfgang Muller); Sophie Langevin (Elke); Myriam Muller (Maria); Milos Hlavak (Innkeeper); Marja-Leena Junker (Innkeeper's Wife).

CREW: Saturn Films, Long Shot Pictures, in association with BBC Films, Deluxe Productions, Film Fund Luxembourg, and Pilgrim Films Ltd presents *The Shadow of the Vampire*. Casting: Carl Proctor. Production Design: Asheton Gorton. Costume Designer: Caroline De Vivaise. Special Effects: Cine Image, General Screen Enterprises. Music: Dan Jones. Director of Photography: Lou Bogue Film Editor: Chris Wyatt. Producers: Nicolas Cage, Jeff Levine. Executive Producers: Paul Brooks, Alan Howden. Written by: Steven Katz. Directed by: E. Elias Merhige. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Berlin, in 1921, legendary film director F.W. Murnau (Malkovich) fails to acquire the rights to Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* but nonetheless forges ahead with production of his own vampire movie: *Nosferatu*. Playing the vampire in the film, Orlock, is a mystery man, Max Schreck (Dafoe) who, it turns out, may be a real vampire. Schreck proves a difficult star for Murnau to contend with. The rest of the cast is terrified of him, and the mystery man possesses an unquenchable appetite not for fame and fortune, but blood.

COMMENTARY: Directed by Merhige, the talent behind one of the most disturbing movies ever made, *Begotten* (1991), *Shadow of the Vampire* is a different breed of vampire film. It is part comedy, part horror, and, indeed, part social commentary. The film is unerringly clever in the way it makes its points about the film industry and compares those elements to vampirism. Throughout most of the picture, *Shadow of the Vampire* takes pains to compare Orlock, played by the brilliant Willem Dafoe, to a method actor. But the real point is a bit more subtle. And that is, simply, that film directors are vampires too. Boosted by eerily accurate recreations of the horror genre milestone *Nosferatu*, *Shadow of the Vampire* is nostalgic, funny, and as pointed in its commentary as a wooden stake.



Willem Dafoe stars as Max Schreck in *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), a horror film that goes behind the making of the silent film classic *Nosferatu* (1922) in fictionalized fashion.

For horror aficionados, the element that likely makes *Shadow of the Vampire* most loveable is the production's fidelity to *Nosferatu*, from the recreation of the sets, and Schreck's unusual chrome-dome visage, to the re-staging of actual shots, angles and scenes from the classic film itself. Merhige also adopts the film techniques of the 1920s to mirror the content, deploying iris in/iris out transition, title cards, and switching the mode to black-and-white on certain occasions. These detailed and loving recreations of an era long gone help to capture the essence of the classic film, as well as elements of the behind-the-scenes story surrounding its making, particularly the copyright battle over *Dracula*. These touches successfully resurrect the context around what is one of the first horror touchstones in cinema history. Certainly, some liberties have been taken with the characters (in fact, real people), so that the fictional story will fly, but this change is understandable. After all, Max Schreck was not a mystery man, nor a vampire, at least in our section of the multiverse. Thus, the film is uncanny in its visual accuracy, if not its fidelity to personal history and the actual details of the film production. The latter fact rankled some critics and scholars, among them Rolf Giesen, author of *The Nosferatu Story: The Seminal Horror Film, Its Predecessors and Its Enduring Legacy* (2019), who observed the following:

Shadow of the Vampire bears not much truth, neither to the background of the original production, nor to the characters involved: a huge team, more people than Murnau had seen on his original production, sets, costumes and make-up perfect, a great cast with Willem Dafoe even nominated for an Academy Award, but a hopeless screenplay that was based on a single idea: that Herr Schreck was a real vampire, built on no or only superficial research.²

If one gazes at the film, however, as a study of filmmaking, and a clever joke, first about method acting, and second about film directors, then the film's value becomes readily apparent. A method actor is a person who disappears into a role, completely submerging or even erasing the identity of the performer. In the film, Schreck, a vampire, is mistaken (with Murnau's help) for just such a committed, or method, artist. For example, he will only appear on set in full make-up and, as a vampire, will only be filmed at night. Those around Murnau mistake these touches for the idiosyncrasies of an actor, the demands of a prima donna, not the requirements of an actual vampire. The admission that there is "*no Max Schreck*," similarly, apparently erases the actor, and places the role, the performance first. Orlock sucks the blood from a rat, argues with the director, demands certain items to accommodate his performance (such as a duplicate of a ship built on the grounds of a castle), all playing into the idea of Orlock not as a vampire, but as an obsessed (and coddled), actor.



This image of Catherine McCormack and Willem Dafoe in Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000) depicts a scene from *Nosferatu* (1922).

Yet *Shadow of the Vampire* is ultimately so clever and so much fun for its other acknowledgment: the fact that directors are vampires. Method actors may be demanding, difficult, and hard-to-reach because of their obsessive commitment to performance but directors are indeed, at least from a certain perspective, literal bloodsuckers. The film's sharpest fangs are aimed at this vocation, actually. In the film, director Murnau takes the blood, sweat and tears of his cast and crew, literally in some cases, to forge his art. There is nothing he won't do, no one he won't sacrifice, no act he won't broach to see his artistic vision come to fruition. His refrain that "*if it's not in the frame, it doesn't exist*," speaks to his particular obsession: the art above all else. Beyond life. Beyond limb. Beyond fear. The fictional Murnau of the film is so committed to his "*very own painting*" on his "*very own cave wall*" that he deserves recognition as a vampire himself, at least a metaphorical one. He creates art not out of altruism, but out of vanity. Merhige realizes he has a funny (but true) observation regarding directors, and makes the most out of it, for comedic and also caustic comparison. Consider: if a director makes a great film, or even a good one, she or he creates their own immortality. Like the vampire, the director can escape mortality, and their name will be spoken for generations to come. Orlock is a literal monster and murderer, who derives his sustenance from blood. Murnau (again, the fictional character) derives his sustenance by making others suffer for his vision.

Shadow of the Vampire's ultimate appeal depends, very much, on what kind of horror fan is watching. The film is very of its moment, the 2000s, and has something in common with the neo slashers, like *Scream 3* (2000). The movie is not just about a vampire, but the making of a film, which allows for all kinds of meta, self-reflexive commentary. The *Scream* movies and other slasher films are authentically frightening, however. *Shadow of the Vampire* offers ghoulish chills, good laughs, and thoughtful commentary, but it is not a straight-forward horror film. Any fan who has appreciation for *Nosferatu*, and for the toil—the blood, again—that goes into movie making, will appreciate the film on its own terms, but don't expect jump scares.

Supernova * * *

Critical Reception

"*Supernova* is adequate space hoopla. The characters are compelling and that's what makes the difference between good space fare and unadulterated jetsam. That, and checking out how the spaceship looks like a health club full of Stairmasters. And giggling at the makeup piled on to simulate Troy's increasing muscle mass. And an ending that suggests both a race-less fate for humankind and a genesis for Kubrick's star child in 2001. Who says you can't have everything?"—John Anderson, *Newsday*: "A Good Cast in Deep Space," January 2000, page B02.

"It's just an *Alien* rip-off, right down the android/ robot who comes to the aid of the ship's crew. But instead of Sigourney Weaver's Ripley fighting a big, lizard-like animal, we have Spader taking on a human who can regenerate. *Supernova* never quite matches the *Alien* films for intensity and scariness"—Jeff Kobelik, *Lincoln Star Journal*: "*Supernova* certainly not a stellar movie effort," January 5, 2000, page 5.

Cast & Crew

CAST: James Spader (Nick Vanzant); Angela Bassett (Dr. Kaela Evers); Robert Forster (Captain Marley); Lou Diamond Phillips (Yerzy Penalosa); Peter Facinelli (Karl Larson); Robin Tunney (Danika Lund); Wilson Cruz (Benj Sotomejor); Eddy Rice, Jr. (Flyboy); Know Grantham White (Troy Larson); Kerrigan Mahan (Troy Larson voice); Vanessa Marshall (Voice of Sweetie).

CREW: United Artists, MGM, Hammerhead Productions and Screenland Pictures presents *Supernova*. Casting: Mary Jo Slater. Production Designer: Marek Dobrowolski. Costume Designer: Bob Ringwood. Special Effects: Digital Domain, Hammerhead Productions, Mobility, Inc., Patrick Tatopoulos Design, Rainmaker Digital Pictures, Santa Barbara Studios. Music: David Williams. Director of Photography: Lloyd Ahern II. Film Editors: Melissa Kent, Michael Schweitzer. Producers: Daniel Chuba, Jamie Dixon, Ash R. Shah. Executive

Producer: Ralph S. Singleton. Story by: William Malone and Daniel Chuba. Written by: David Campbell and Wilson. Directed by: Walter Hill. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In a few centuries, the rescue ship *Nightingale* receives an emergency distress signal from Titan-37, an abandoned mining operation on a rogue moon. New to the ship is the co-pilot, Vanzant (Spader), an ex-junkie who has earned the dislike of the ship's doctor, Evers (Bassett), because of her personal history with a violent junkie named Karl Nelson.



Two views of terror from *Supernova*. Top: Kaela Evers (Angela Bassett) battles the not-quite-human psychotic Troy Larson (Peter Facinelli). Bottom: We get a closer look at Larson as he takes aim at the crew of the spaceship that rescued him from a comet.

After a dangerous FTL jump, the ship's captain, Marley (Forster), is mutilated in his bio-protection chamber and asks to be killed. And the sender of the distress call turns out to be the son of Karl Nelson, Troy (Facinelli). While the ship's crew repairs the ship, and prepares to escape a nearby blue giant's

supernova, the crew also learns that Troy possesses an unstable alien artifact, a would-be weapon of mass destruction.



Two more views of “*Dead Calm (1989) in Space, Supernova.*” Top: Protagonists Nick Vanzant (James Spader) is pictured with medical officer Kaela Evers (Angela Bassett). Bottom: Vanzant (Spader) explores a destroyed facility in space gear.

COMMENTARY: Bad press aside, *Supernova* isn’t a stinker. It features a stellar cast, including James Spader, Angela Bassett, Robin Tunney, Lou Diamond Phillips, and Robert Forster, as well as some unique narrative and thematic concepts. And yet despite such virtues, the film’s action and death scenes are largely run-of-the-mill affairs, less kinetic and less effective than similar scenes in pictures of this vintage and type, like *Event Horizon* (1997) or *Pitch Black* (2000), for example.

Behind-the-scenes turmoil on *Supernova* was legendary, with director Walter Hill opting to be credited with the pseudonym “Thomas Lee.” When MGM refused to approve the budget necessary for special effects, Hill left the production, allegedly, and Jack Sholder was retained to complete the film. Then, Francis Ford Coppola attempted to save the film in the editing process. Given a history like that,

Supernova is actually a bit more coherent than one has any right to expect. Legendary box office “bomb” or no, the film boasts a few facets that hold the interest. The first is the deliberate aping of the *Dead Calm* (1989) narrative, which was writer William Malone’s intent. The second quality of value is the film’s steadfast refusal to clear up the ambiguity of the final act, and the fate that may befall Earth. Third and finally, *Supernova* provides an interesting contrast in “percentages,” in a subplot that suggests the greatest treasure in the universe may not be ninth-dimensional matter, but rather the human capability to connect with his fellow man or woman, right down to the genetic level.

The most notable aspect of *Supernova*’s story, perhaps, is its dedicated repetition of the plot-points of Philip Noyce’s sea-based thriller, *Dead Calm*. In that film, a couple played by Sam Neill and Nicole Kidman go to sea following the death of their child, only to help out the last survivor of a ruined vessel, played by Billy Zane. Zane’s character turns out to be a dangerous psychopath, and he strands Neill’s character on his useless old boat while he terrorizes Kidman’s character on the family yacht. In *Supernova*, viewers also get the passenger from the ruined “other” location, in this case a moon-based mining operation. The film also finds Spader’s lead character, Vanzant marooned there, and fighting his way to get back to his ship, much as Neill did in the earlier picture. Facinelli, like Zane, is a physically fit, twitchy psychotic who, before his reign of terror ends, has his way with a female shipmate. Outer space, obviously, substitutes for the terrestrial high seas. *Supernova* has its problems, but the idea behind it, of bringing *Dead Calm* into the future, is not one of them. One may recognize the *Dead Calm* flourishes and consider them derivative—because they are—but *Supernova* is also original enough to introduce some new elements to the formula. In this case, it’s the presence of the ultimate WMD, the alien artifact that elevates the film’s ending. The movie’s denouement, which eschews audience desire for closure, also leaves audiences to ponder what might could happen in the brave new world following the finale.

There’s also a present—if irregularly enunciated—through-line in *Supernova* about the human race, or more accurately, human nature. Once rescued by the crew of the *Nightingale*, the evil Troy/Karl tries to bring them around to his cause. He promises them each five percent of the wealth he plans to acquire from the alien artifact. He prizes monetary wealth, and is surprised that there are no takers, save for Yerzy. At film’s end, uniquely, Vanzant and Dr. Evers are forced to share a biological containment unit so as to survive the space jump away from the supernova. In the process, they each swap 2.5 percent of their DNA with the other. Add those figures up, and you have 5 percent, Troy’s proposed figure for recompense. The notion here may be, simply, that one “treasure” is more worthwhile or more valuable than the other. Troy promises material wealth to the crew, but at the risk of everything, at the risk of the universe itself. By contrast, the biological transfer renders Evers pregnant, ostensibly with Vanzant’s child.

Who needs the magic of unstable, 9th dimensional matter, when human matter can “replenish” life, and in a way that is safe?

Finally, *Supernova* ends with a terrifying thought. The shockwave from the supernova will detonate the 9th dimensional bomb, and the ensuing shockwave will spread out, to all corners of the universe. It will strike Earth in fifty-one years. When it strikes, it will either destroy the planet, or change the very nature of human life. *Supernova* gives no idea which outcome is more likely, or what that change could be. But audiences ought to give the movie credit for setting up an apocalypse that it never intends to depict and asking viewers to speculate about the possibilities. Would the shockwave render all men and women physically powerful, but mentally unhinged, like Troy? Or would it usher in the very “leap in evolution” that the mad Troy foresees?

There are many ways that the movie could have ended. Troy could have been killed. The ship could have escaped. There could have been a final sting in the tail/tale. Instead, *Supernova* leaves audiences to ponder the idea that a “wave” is coming for mankind, and that it is something he can’t avoid. In a decade when so many prequels or reboots go out of their way to explain every detail, character and motivation, to the detriment of mystery and imagination, *Supernova* deserves credit for not spoon-feeding the audience its “explanations” about the narrative.

When one couples this idea of some force changing man’s physical nature with the moment early in the film in which Captain Marley (Robert Forster) discusses “violent animation” of the 20th century

(meaning *Tom and Jerry*), and calling it a “catharsis” that can, under some circumstances, unleash “human malevolence,” the film’s theme comes into sharp focus. Tom and Jerry live in a world in which there are no physical limits or restraints. They bash, bruise and bludgeon each other with that power, and do almost nothing else. If the shock wave unshackles man from his biological restraints, will he find a better use for that power than the animated cat and mouse, his artistic creations, do?

A further connection to the film’s leitmotif comes in characterization of the ship’s computer, Sweetie. The ship’s navigator, Benjamin (Wilson Cruz), attempts to over-write her programming when under duress, when threatened with death by Troy. He attempts to unshackle her, however, *so she can kill*. Again, there’s the notion present that without “programming” (or biological) restraints, the universe tends to violence. Man creates Tom and Jerry and Sweetie the Computer and directs them both towards that violence. What chance is there he won’t act violently if transformed into a super-man?

Supernova falters, largely, in that most of the crew deaths seem to happen all at once, and without much distinction. Two crew members, one after the other, get ejected into space without protection, and die there. Similarly, the battle scenes on Titan and aboard the *Nightingale* seem claustrophobic and messy, but not in an intentional or good way. The scuffles are virtually incoherent, and so some sense of suspense is sacrificed.

There are gaps in the storytelling too. Danika Lund is shown to be in an intense but satisfying relationship with Yerzy. So much so that they are hoping to be approved as parents when they return home to Earth. They want to have a child together. But after seeing Troy naked, Danika makes love to him. She does not seem to be under duress when she does so. She is not executing a strategy to assure escape (as Nicole Kidman’s character was in a similar scene in *Dead Calm*). Instead, the audience has no understanding of why—besides carnal lust—she would sacrifice everything to be with this guy for the right fifteen minutes. This is not an argument that people don’t make impulsive decisions about sex all the time, only that the movie provides little insight into Danika’s character, and her decisions. Does she feel trapped by Yerzy? Does she really not want children? Is this her way of avoiding those responsibilities? It would be nice to see more clarity in terms of character motivations. If audiences understood Danika’s reasons, it might be able to fit them into the film’s larger puzzle or leitmotif. Sex, like violence, might be deemed the result of our biological programming, and this aspect could have been explored in the context of the film’s themes.

Supernova overcame incredible odds just to get to theaters, and given the tumult of its production, it’s amazing that the film succeeds to the degree it does. The silver-blue palette suffusing the film gives it a sense of visual consistency, and from time to time, the script orbits a meaningful thought about mankind, and what kind of creature he is, or might become, given a giant leap forward in evolution. It’s no *Sunshine* (2007), *Pitch Black*, or *Event Horizon*, but *Supernova* occasionally shines brightly indeed. One can either enjoy the flashes of ingenuity on their own terms or curse the general darkness of the enterprise.

Urban Legends: Final Cut * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“...just a B-movie that somehow made it to the big screen, when in fact, it should have gone straight to video.”—Karl Goerner *Prince George Citizen*, September 29, 2000, page 26.

“...could spawn its own urban legend about the horror movie that bored audiences to death.”—*Cineman Syndicate*, September 25, 2000.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jennifer Morrison (Amy Mayfield); Matthew Davis (Travis/Trevor Stark); Hart Bochner (Professor Solomon); Loretta Devine (Reese); Joseph Lawrence (Graham Manning); Anson Mount (Toby); Eva Mendes

(Vanessa); Jessica Cauffiel (Sandra); Anthony Anderson (Stan); Michael Bacall (Dirk); Marco Hofschneider (Simon); Derek Aasland (Kevin); Jacinda Barrett (Lisa); Peter Millard (Dr. Fain); Chas Lawther (Dean Patterson).

CREW: Columbia Pictures, Phoenix Pictures, in association with Canal+DA, presents *Urban Legends: Final Cut*. Casting: Randi Hiller. Production Designer: Mark Zuelzke. Costume Designer: Trysha Bakker, Marie-Sylvie Deveau. Special Effects: GFVX, Pacific Title. Music: John Ottman. Director of Photography: Brian Pearson. Film Editing: Rob Kobrin, John Ottman. Producers: Gina Matthews, Neal H. Moritz, Richard Luke Rothschild. Executive Producers: Brad Luff, Nicholas Osborne. Based on characters created by: Silvio Horta. Written by: Paul Harris Boardman and Scott Derrickson. Directed by: John Ottman.

M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A film student at the most prestigious film program in the country, Amy (Morrison), produces a horror film about a serial killer at the same time a series of murders about urban legends rock her college campus. Even as they compete for the Hitchcock Prize, Lisa's friends and competitors in academia begin dropping like flies. One student, Lisa (Barrett) has her kidney removed and wakes up in a bathtub filled with ice, for example. Another student, Travis (Davis), apparently commits suicide. Only one person on the whole campus, Reese (Devine) has seen something like this before....

COMMENTARY: Pre-9/11, horror films from the turn-of-the-century were still playing out the “post-modern” *Scream* (1996) playbook, often tiresomely. Some scholars term these efforts—such as *Valentine*, *Cherry Falls* and *Scream 3*—neo-slasher films, because they couple the old slasher paradigm from the 1980s with a turn-of-the-millennium “self-awareness,” or knowingness about their format. Three major slasher franchises were born during this era: *Scream*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, and *Urban Legends*. *Final Cut* is the second installment in the *Urban Legends* saga and is followed in the same decade by the even less satisfactory *Urban Legends: Bloody Mary*.

Unlike the other two franchises, which present the appearance, at least of a consistent boogeyman (despite different identities in the costume), in Ghostface and the Fisherman, the *Urban Legends* series offers a different boogeyman in each film, which robs the franchise of some of its fun. The threat in common, the organizing principle, of course, is urban legends, stories that are transmitted widely and repeatedly, but which bear little accuracy or truth. Here, many such urban legends get a call out from the filmmakers, including the missing kidneys after an amateur surgery, to a carnival attraction using real corpses (“The Tunnel of Terror”) and a serial killer licking a sleeping person's hand and being mistaken for an over-affectionate canine.



Someone is killing young college students and auteurs as they create their masterpieces in *Urban Legends: Final Cut* (2000). Pictured here, left to right, are aspiring filmmakers Amy (Jennifer Morrison), Graham

Final Cut, as the sub-title indicates, also sets its action at a prestigious film school, an opportunity which brings in much self-reflexive commentary about films in general, and horror films specifically. The film's first scene depicts the making of a movie about an imperiled plane in flight and harks back to *The Twilight Zone*'s "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet," and forecasts some of the terror of *Final Destination*. The students compete for the Hitchcock Award for best student film, and the motivation for the killing involves another student film and its failure to win that award. Both film professors—often frustrated would-be filmmakers—and pretentious film students, who tend to believe they are creating, for the first time, a major work of art that outshines everything else in cinema history, are routinely parodied in the film. *Final Cut* also takes on the eternal debate in horror film fandom: CGI vs. practical effects. One character even notes "*Digital sucks, man! Latex rules!*"

The film's twists and turns include identical twins, a filmed murder (or a snuff film, as it were), and a return appearance from Loretta Devine, as Reese, the security guard who witnessed the murderous events of the first film and refused to cover them up. Some of the performances are strong here too, particularly Anson Mount's (*Star Trek: Discovery* [2017–]) as he plays a shitty, entitled student film director.

Urban Legends is lively and fast moving, and intermittently smart but something about it fails to get the heart beating. The film never rises to the level of being scary, and it's almost as if the Producers and writers outsmarted themselves. There are so many plotlines and ideas going on, so many in-jokes and references, that someone forgot to forge a linear, frightening narrative. The urban legends piece is just one piece of many, and almost seems forgotten compared to the in-jokes about film students, film professors, and the film industry. The film lacks the focus it should have, on urban legends, in an attempt to reach the "meta" zenith of films in the *Scream* franchise.

A sign at the film's "tunnel of terror" reads "*Turn back now. Misery awaits.*" *Urban Legends: Final Cut* is probably worth a watch if one likes the neo slashers, but after that curiosity viewing, there's not much need to explore further titles in this franchise, which is on a downhill trajectory. Beware: misery awaits.

The Watcher *

Critical Reception

"Is it just me, or does every serial-killer movie out of Hollywood these days look like an aborted music video?"—Dann Gire, *Daily Herald*: "Chord of terror in *The Watcher*, killer Keanu Reeves stays tied to James Spader's cop with piano wire," September 8, 2000, page 32.

"Just when the character needs to be getting creepier.... Reeves starts to earn unintended giggles from the audience."—Steve Murray, *The Atlanta Journal*: "Watcher just wants to be noticed," September 8, 2000, page 5

Cast & Crew

CAST: James Spader (Joel Campbell); Marissa Tomei (Polly); Keanu Reeves (Griffin); Ernie Hudson (Ibby); Gina Alexander (Sharon); Rebekah Louise Smith (Ellie); Michele Di Maso (Rachel); Chris Ellis (Hollis); Robert Cichini (Mitch); Yvonne Niami (Lisa); Jenny McShane (Diana).

CREW: Universal Studios and Interlight presents a Choi/Niamo Production, *The Watcher*. Casting: Mary Jo Slater. Production Designer: Briant Eatwell, Maria Caso. Costume Designer: Jay Hurley. Special Effects: Centropolis Effects. Music: Marco Beltrami. Director of Photography: Michael Chapman. Film Editor: Richard Nord. Producers: Christopher Eberts, Nile Niami, Jeff Rice. Executive Producers: Patrick Choi, Paul Pompian. Story by: Darcy Meyers, David Eliot. Written by: David Eliot, Clay Ayers. Director: Joe Charbanic. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A pill-popping, traumatized detective, Campbell (Spader), moves to Chicago from California, only to learn that the serial killer whom he was hunting there, Griffin (Reeves), has also moved to the Windy City. The killer begins to taunt Campbell with telephone calls and photographs of his next intended victims. Campbell attempts to save two women from the deranged psychopath and fails. For his next victim, Griffin abducts Campbell's therapist, Polly (Tomei), leading to a fiery confrontation between cop and criminal.

COMMENTARY: There was some controversy, at least in terms of reviewers, surrounding this author's decision, in *Horror Films of the 1990s*, to include serial killer films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Se7en* (1995), and *The Bone Collector* (1999) in a text devoted to horror films. However, the serial killer was the most popular and oft-seen "monster" of that era of film, one who headlined gory, suspenseful and terrifying films. Were these movies thrillers or horror films? There is still debate, no doubt. However, even doubters must acknowledge that serial killers are tangentially, at least, related to the horror genre, and may even be viewed as a kind of missing link between 1980s slashers and 2000s era "monsters" like the character, Jigsaw seen in the *Saw* franchise, or even Rob Zombie's *The Devil's Rejects* (2005). The 1990s is dominated by serial killers, interlopers, and the "new" slashers, post-*Scream*. Yet by Y2K, the serial killer film and its most primary format, the police procedural, were old "news," and creatively worn out. The best artists working in this field, like Ridley Scott, in *Hannibal*, or Tarsem Singh, on *The Cell*, attempted to move away from the procedural into other formats, like opera, or science fiction/fantasy. There was an awareness that for the serial killer film to thrive into a second decade of popularity, the format had to evolve.

But then, in the early 2000s there came junk like *The Watcher*, an utterly by-the-numbers, big-budget fiasco of a serial killer film that managed to offer nothing new to the moribund format. In this film, a TV newscaster literally comments, word-for-word on the "cat and mouse" relationship between serial killer, and serial killer hunter, a hackneyed and humorous turn of phrase that signifies how clichéd, through umpteen cinematic and TV repetitions, the serial killer had become by the 21st century. A deadly game of cat and mouse? In the year 2000 could someone literally write that line with a straight face?



Det. Joel Campbell (James Spader) plays a deadly game of cat and mouse in the serial killer horror film *The Watcher* (2000).

Apparently, yes.

In this film, James Spader plays a dissolute detective who, because of his past trauma, can barely get out of bed each day, and who shares a symbiotic relationship with Keanu Reeves' serial killer. In films such as *The Matrix* (1999) or the John Wick saga, Keanu Reeves has proven a versatile and charismatic performer. In *The Watcher*, however, he appears to be tranquilized, able to project no energy, enthusiasm or interest in his role. He is hindered further by a screenplay which provides no motivation for his character and yet provides abundant screen time. Keanu Reeves is onscreen a lot, but able to project virtually no menace. And embarrassingly, the movie opens and closes with a slow-motion dance by the actor, as he holds Marisa Tomei's character hostage. This dance looks like it was captured accidentally on film, before a scene began, and then an editor—desperate to imbue Reeves' character with any “insane” edge whatsoever—cut it in slow motion photography to book-end the picture. To say that the improvised dance moment is embarrassing is a huge understatement.

In fact, *The Watcher* reeks of desperation in terms of editing. There is no real gore or violence in the film, so Reeves' serial killer just creeps up on his victims and grabs them from behind. We never see him actually murder them in overtly violent fashion. Instead, these scenes are cut with bursts or flashes of “negative” pictures, in an attempt to muster some energy or vitality. The soundtrack is hyper-aggressive too, another indication that post-production, anything and everything was being done to salvage a film that was terrible, and furthermore, laughable.

For those hoping to see an intriguing serial killer film, *The Watcher* disappoints. In the course of the movie, we learn nothing about the antagonist's modus operandi, except that he “watches” his victims to learn their routine, before murdering them. We don't learn his methods, his background, his DSM diagnosis, or anything like that. Instead, he is a screenplay serial killer, designed and executed only to be a foil for Spader's detective, with whom a symbiotic relationship is suggested. Without any of these details, and with Reeves' flaccid performance, *The Watcher* features no sense of menace or drive. Perhaps there could have been a homo-erotic angle, given all the suggestion of a connection, but again, Reeves and Spader ignite no sparks together.

In the 1970s, bad horror movies announced their badness in imagery that was so dark that the movies couldn't be seen, bad monster costumes, and sound so poor the film's dialogue couldn't be heard. By the year 2000, it was a different ballgame indeed. Films like *The Watcher* are technically proficient, and attempt to cloak their insipidity by Casting “A” list actors, pumped-up, steroidal soundtracks, and “flash cuts” designed to inject excitement or interest in a script so bad it is hard to believe it was greenlit. There were a lot of mediocre and uninspired serial killer movies in the 1990s, but *The Watcher* is just about the worst this author has ever seen. It is, in every way, a disaster

Don't watch *The Watcher*.

***What Lies Beneath* ★ ★ ★ ★**

Critical Reception

“...*What Lies Beneath* is several different films, some even contradictory, all trying to coexist, like the Israelis and the Palestinians—or *Scream* and *Poltergeist*—in the same physical space.... On one hand, *Beneath* is a neo-Hitchcock suspense thriller with a Bernard Herrmann-esque score by Alan Silvestri accentuating a brisk succession of bump-in-the-dark moments. But while Hitchcock in general scorned the supernatural, this film shoehorns the ingredients of an old-fashioned dark-and-stormy-night ghost story into its plot dynamic. *Beneath's* cultural politics are equally divided. On one side you have the traditional movie exploitation of a defenseless-looking woman (well-played, as per usual, by Pfeiffer), pale and fragile in her nightgown or in a bathtub, very much in peril. But the film simultaneously takes a proto-feminist stance, implying that no horror is greater than what men do to women and mocking those who underestimate a woman's strength or try to dismiss genuine concerns as a warped bid for attention or a product of the empty-nest syndrome. The only thing holding all this together, and it is no small task, is Zemeckis' directing skills.”—Kenneth Turan, *The Los Angeles Times*: “The Lasting Gasp; *What Lies Beneath* builds up suspense

with a story that pushes the bounds," July 21, 2000, page 1.

"Robert Zemeckis' *What Lies Beneath* has four things going for it: a good director in Zemeckis ... a strong cast in Michelle Pfeiffer and Harrison Ford, superior production values, and the ghost of Alfred Hitchcock hovering over the entire production. How much does Hitchcock influence Zemeckis' film? Considering that Ford plays a character named Norman and much of the film's early suspense comes straight out of *Rear Window* (Pfeiffer's character uses binoculars to spy on a neighbor she suspects of committing murder), let's just say that Hitch is rattling chains at every turn. *Beneath*, which draws from too many other films ... is beautifully shot, nicely scored and well-crafted. That is, unfortunately, until the last 20 minutes, when Zemeckis mistrusts himself and his audience, and relies fatally on the ending of *Fatal Attraction*, which brought down that film—and, unremarkably, has the same effect here."—Chris Smith, *Bangor Daily News*: "Hitchcock influence apparent in film *What Lies Beneath*," July 24, 2000, page 1.

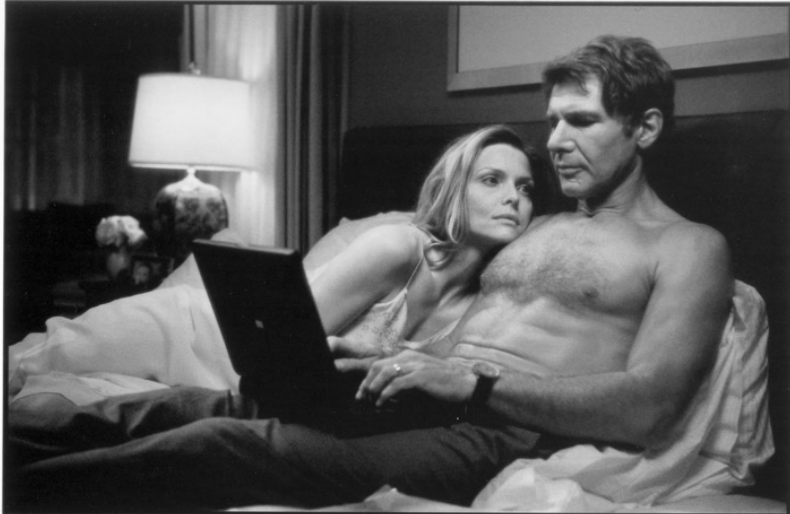
"Having conceded at the outset that the only way to make a successful psychological thriller is as a homage to Hitchcock (incidentally, Zemeckis's director's bible is a Truffaut book on Hitchcock), he goes on to make a so-so Hitchcockian thriller, but takes a far more interesting look at the interior life of his lead character than Hitch would ever have bothered doing. Michelle Pfeiffer is almost Hamlet-like in her struggle to come to terms with what's going on around her, while the answer is lodged inside her the entire time. In terms of Pfeiffer's character, what lies beneath is isolation, solitude and a dislocation from the reality of her circumstances. After one particularly frightening and perplexing episode, she finds the words 'You know' scrawled on her bathroom mirror, and she does know, but the truth that may help her solve the riddle of the movie has been repressed. The reality of her character is as well hidden from her as the true nature of her own husband."—John Lane, *Irish Times*, "What lies beneath is a disturbing vision. Robert Zemeckis may be one of Hollywood's most popular directors, but behind the action is the individual isolated in an uncontrollable universe, argues John Lane." January 23, 2001, page 12.

Cast & Crew

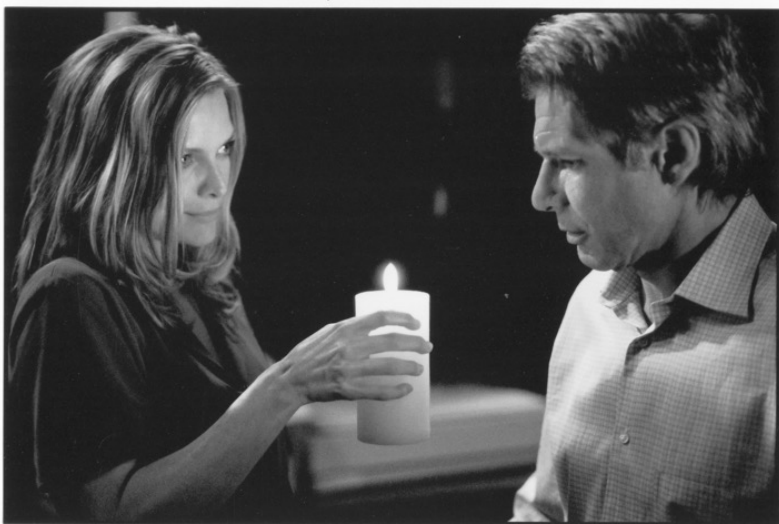
CAST: Michelle Pfeiffer (Claire Spencer); Katharine Town (Caitlin Spencer); Miranda Otto (Mary Feur); James Remar (Warren Feur); Harrison Ford (Norman Spencer); Victoria Bidewell (Beatrice); Diana Scarwid (Jody); Dennison Samaroo, Jennifer Tung, Rachel Singer, Daniel Zelman (PHD Students); Elliot Goresky (Teddy); Ray Baker (Dr. Stan Powell); Wendy Crewson (Elena); Amber Valletta (Madison Elizabeth Frank).

CREW: 20th Century-Fox, DreamWorks Pictures and Image Movers present *What Lies Beneath*. Casting: Marcia DeBonis, Ellen Lewis. Production Designers: Rick Carter, Jim Teegarden. Costume Designer: Susie DeSanto. Special Effects: Sony Pictures Imageworks, Stan Winston Studio, Station X Studios. Music: Alan Silvestri. Director of Photography: Don Burgess. Film Editor: Arthur Schmidt. Producer: Jack Rapke, Steve Starkey, Robert Zemeckis. Executive Producers: Joan Bradshaw, Mark Johnson. Story by: Sarah Kernochan, Clark Gregg. Written by: Clark Gregg. Directed by: Robert Zemeckis. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 130 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the surface, Claire Spencer (Pfeiffer) has a beautiful life. She lives in Vermont in a palatial home on a bay. She is married to an accomplished academic and researcher, Norman (Ford), and she has just sent her beloved daughter off to a prestigious college to start school. But this beautiful life begins to show cracks around the edges when quarrelsome neighbors move in next door, and Claire becomes obsessed with them, believing that the husband has murdered his wife. Although that turns out not to be true at all, Claire begins to suspect that her own house is haunted by the spirit of a missing girl, Mary Feur. As she digs into the girl's disappearance, she also begins to learn unpleasant secrets about what lies beneath the happy, placid surface of her life.



What Lies Beneath is the tale of justice meted from beyond the grave. Featured here are two views of the cast. Top: Claire Spencer (Michelle Pfeiffer) shares her concerns about strange happenings next door with her husband, Norman (Harrison Ford). Bottom: Claire (Pfeiffer) sends her daughter, Caitlin (Katherine Towne), off to college.



Two more stills from Robert Zemeckis's "Men Behaving Badly" horror, *What Lies Beneath* (2000). Top: Claire Spencer (Michelle Pfeiffer) finds herself endangered by her husband's dark secret. Bottom: Claire (Pfeiffer) and Norman (Harrison Ford) embark with candles to contact a spirit whom Claire believes needs her help.

COMMENTARY: *What Lies Beneath* is a horror film of Hitchcockian precision. Zemeckis has crafted a film of uncommon beauty, and remarkable technical achievement. His selection of compositions, his choices in framing, and his obsession even, with MacGuffins, all recall the cinematic work of the late, great Master of Suspense, Alfred Hitchcock. From its natural vistas to its choice in cast, *What Lies Beneath* is unusually gorgeous. All of the "up front" values form the edifice or surface upon which the movie's narrative hinges, and *What Lies Beneath*, on a shallow level, plays out like a million other late-90s or early 2000s thrillers about a bored housewife, who, tired of her affluent digs and meaningless domestic routine, pulls a James Stewart from *Rear Window* (1954) and begins observing strange goings-on next door, to the irritation of her put-upon husband.

But the movie is called *What Lies Beneath*, and so the surface world of the film, as well as the surface world of Claire Spencer, is shattered by the acknowledgment of a deeper, heretofore undetected reality. Bored, empty-nester Claire goes on an investigation that, to her surprise, leads right back home,

right back to her. Specifically, she discovers that her husband, named after the two-faced Norman Bates of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), is, similarly, two-faced. He is not the mild-mannered, distracted academician he appears to be. Rather, he had an affair with the missing girl, and murdered her. And he has known this all along, gaslighting Claire every step of the way. The beauty of the film's surface values—the elegant camera, the beautiful photography on the bay—is ultimately juxtaposed with the personal ugliness in Claire's life. She has traded the things that mattered to her (a career as a concert cellist, her music) for financial security and beautiful surroundings. But the man she shares her life with is a monster. Worse, she has known this fact before, and, following a car accident, buried it. She has repressed the truth. It's as if Claire herself is just a beautiful surface too. What lies beneath is not just the truth concerning Norman, but the truth about her nature. Claire would rather hide. She would rather bury and forget the truth of Norman's infidelity than confront him about it.

The 2000s brings to the horror cinema many men who "behave badly" in a way that the #MeToo culture is quite familiar with in 2021. A widower and his movie producer friend trick women into auditioning for the role of the widower's new wife in *Audition*. A psychologist sexually tortures female patients, all while appearing to be a happily married and respectable man of the community in *Gothika* (2003). Then there's Patrick Wilson's abuser in *Hard Candy* (2005), who masquerades as an ally, as a progressive environmentalist, but is a sinister pedophile. Harrison Ford's Norman joins this rogue's gallery here and is a murderer and liar extraordinaire. He reveals the "truth" to Claire only a little at a time, when it serves him, and keeps insisting that their life together, as an affluent, happily married couple, "can go on." This is actually precisely what Claire desires to hear, but she gathers the strength not to retreat again to that world of comfort and instead seek justice for Mary. Norman also does what appears to be the right thing ("I'm asking you to forgive me") and even pretends to begin the confession process by calling 911. But it's all a ploy, another gaslighting campaign, and soon he resorts to attempting to murder Claire.

In the end, the supernatural achieves what earthly law enforcement and the legal system could not. Mary's specter returns from the grave and drags Norman to his death underwater. In doing so, she and Claire are linked in a sisterhood of sorts. Claire refused to give up on justice for Mary, even when it finally meant sacrificing her placid surface life of affluent, empty perfection, and in recompense, Mary saves her life when Norman attempts to repeat his original sin and drown his wife as he drowned his mistress. Like so many "Men Behaving Badly" films circa 2000–2009, this film seems to suggest that though justice is delayed, it will come, if only under the auspices of a victim who has already lost something, in this case, her life. Again, the supernatural mechanism steps in because man's law has failed.

The Hitchcockian veneer—the perfect gliding shots, the immaculately framed close-ups, the glorious tracking shots—all act as the "formal" surface of the film. The icy precision and formality of Zemeckis's camera diagrams and reflects Claire's aesthetically perfect life in the opening acts. But the exquisite technique, the lovely production design, and even the relative, determined artifice of Pfeiffer's mannered, ice-princess performance (recalling the work of a Kim Novak or Grace Kelly), turn into something modern, personal and ugly in the last act, as Claire gathers the strength to confront Norman. Faster cutting and CGI are utilized for the final confrontation, as if to break the link between "artificial" Hollywood past, and naturalistic Hollywood present. The form mirrors the story in a very real way. Claire thought she lived in a storybook fairy tale, a Hollywood movie.

Turns out she's living in a horror film.

This shift from Hitchcockian artifice to modern-day naturalism proved a bit much, it's true, for some audiences and critics. Many were disappointed with the shift from retro-Hitchcockian thriller at the start to the gonzo horror movie, replete with CGI ghosts, in the last act. Oddly, it all holds together well as a reflection of Claire's perspective. This is how she sees her own life and experiences. The story's left turn into supernatural horror may alienate some viewers, but it also represents well the interpersonal horror—*what lies beneath*—bursting through to the surface. Of seeming "normality" (Normanity?). Since Claire has lost some of her memories (following a car accident) and repressed some memories too, the idea that realization should seep through in a dream-like—or nightmare-like, more

aply—fashion actually works in the film’s favor.

Wrongly described as *Fatal Attraction* with ghosts, *What Lies Beneath* thrives in a unique, original, and more modern way. In *Fatal Attraction* (1987), Glenn Close played a family-destroying psychopath, out to ruin a “man.” She was the monster of that film. All the blame went to her, and she was a villain. In *What Lies Beneath*, Mary, the ghost, is no such villain. Rather, blame for a marital affair that could destroy a family is laid, appropriately, at Norman’s feet. He is not the victim of a psychotic woman who couldn’t recognize that a fling was just a fling. Instead, he is a maniacal, entitled man of privilege, a fact showcased by the constant references to his esteemed father, a scientist who made the family name, essentially. As such, he will do anything to hold onto his status. If that means murdering his mistress, he’s in. If that means murdering his wife, he’s down for that as well. Where *Fatal Attraction* sees women as unstable, emotional psychotics, *What Lies Beneath* explores the theme of toxic masculinity. It offers an inversion of the male-centric viewpoint that dominated *Fatal Attraction*.

What Lies Beneath is the rare horror film that escalates from cerebral thrills to outright suspense, specifically in a scene involving a bathtub, to outright, pedal-to-the-metal on-screen violence. Again, the title is useful in describing how the film functions. At first, a beautiful world is shown to have cracks and breaks, at least periodically, as a bored housewife is “revived” intellectually by a mystery in her neighborhood. Once that façade is cracked, the film descends into utter violence, suggesting that what lies beneath toxic masculinity is murder and mayhem.

It’s fascinating to watch the film with someone who has never seen it before and watch how their perception of Norman changes. He is the epitome of the tolerant, long-suffering husband at first, trying it seems, to support his wife in her strange occult pastime. Soon however, his veneer is ripped away and we see him for the monster he is. This author has read reviews, and seen viewers report, with agitation, that they don’t believe the story as it ultimately occurs; that it takes a wrong turn when that nice guy, Norman, is outed as the instigator of all the malice. Harrison Ford is the bad guy? One wonders if they had the same criticism of *Psycho*, and Norman Bates.

Even in horror movies, some folks tend to give a certain kind of guy a pass and look for someone else (perhaps a woman? perhaps a ghost?) to be the real villain. *What Lies Beneath* plays not just with Hitchcockian technique and supernatural tropes, it asks audiences to gaze at what lies beneath their assumptions about men and women too. Harrison Ford always plays nice guys, right? Norman is just holding onto his marriage, right?

Er, no.

What lies beneath this film, and that which is accomplished through Zemeckis’s incredible technique and clever writing, is the suggestion that though society favors the establishment, fate itself has a way of righting the scales of cosmic justice.

At least until our society receives a wake-up call.

TIMELINE: 2001

January 15: Wikipedia launches, becoming the world’s first online encyclopedia.

January 19: An outbreak of the highly contagious foot-and-mouth disease occurs in the UK, and more than six million cows and sheep are put to death.

January 20: George W. Bush, son of former President George H.W. Bush, is sworn in as the 43rd President of the United States. Thousands of Americans protest his inauguration—the largest inaugural protest since Nixon’s in 1973—and Bush’s limousine is struck by an egg during the inaugural parade. The new

president is greeted by placards reading "Commander in Thief."

March 23: The Russian space station Mir falls to Earth, in the South Pacific Ocean.

April 1: After a mid-air collision with a Chinese fighter, the U.S. crew of a surveillance plane is detained in China for ten days as the Bush Administration contends with its first international crisis.

May 7: Police question Democratic representative Gary Condit about the disappearance of intern Chandra Levy, with whom he has having an extra-marital affair. The National press goes on a feeding frenzy, widely implicating Condit in her murder. Condit, a Blue Dog Democrat, loses re-election in 2002.

June 6: Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords leaves the Republican Party to caucus with the Democrats, handing over control of the Senate to the Democrats.

June 7: The Bush Tax Cuts are signed into a law with the claim that they will pay for themselves. Years later, a non-partisan Congressional Budget Office Assessment reports that the Bush Tax Cuts added 1.5 trillion dollars to U.S. debt, 2002–2012.

August 6: While clearing brush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, President Bush receive a PDB (Presidential Daily Briefing) with the title "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S." It refers to increased chatter of a terrorist attack on the United States by the radical Islamist group, Al Qaeda, which had already struck the U.S.S. *Cole* in 2000.

August 8: Alabama Supreme Court Chief and alleged pedophile Roy Moore has a monument of the Ten Commandments installed in the state judiciary building. He loses a lawsuit, and it is removed. Later, he loses his judgeship as well.

August 25: The American pop star Aaliyah is killed in an airplane crash.

September 10: New Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declares the Pentagon Bureaucracy America's greatest enemy, after announcing it has lost 2.3 trillion dollars.

September 11: America is struck by a coordinated terrorist attack that takes 2,996 American lives. The Twin Towers in New York are brought down by hijacked airliners after they collide with the skyscrapers. A hijacked airliner also attacks the Pentagon, in Arlington, Virginia. Finally, United 93, another hijacked airliner, goes down in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after the passengers heroically attempt to retake the craft. Osama Bin Laden, leader of the radical Islamist group Al Qaeda ("The Base"), is fingered as the mastermind behind the deadly attacks.

September 18: America suffers a second terrorist attack a week after 9/11. Anthrax spores are mailed from Princeton, New Jersey, to the offices of ABC, CBS, and NBC News, as well as to the offices of *The New York Post*, and the *National Enquirer*. More than twenty people are sickened by the spores, and five Americans are killed.

September 20: President Bush addresses the United States Congress and the American people, declaring the onset of the "War on Terror." He declares "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." No end date or measure for success is declared in this new War on Terror, effectively meaning that the United States has been put on a permanent war footing.

- October 7: The War on Terror has its first campaign theatre: Afghanistan. The American mission is known as Operation Enduring Freedom.
- October 8: The U.S. Creates the Office of Homeland Security to contend with terrorist threats inside the U.S.
- October 14: America suffers another Anthrax attack, this one aimed at democratic senators Tom Daschle and Patrick Leahy, who receive envelopes filled with spores.
- October 25: Microsoft launches Windows XP.
- October 26: The Patriot Act becomes law in the United States. It authorizes indefinite detention of immigrants and permits the search of homes or businesses without an owner's consent or knowledge. It also increases the U.S. Government's ability to undertake surveillance (such as roving wire taps).
- November 13: President Bush authorizes military tribunals against foreign combatants in the War on Terror.
- December 1: The Battle of Tora Bora begins in Afghanistan and lasts for nearly two weeks. Osama Bin Laden eludes capture.
- December 2: Enron files for bankruptcy, the largest such bankruptcy in U.S. history. At stake are 63.4 billion dollars in assets.
- December 13: Twelve people are killed in a terrorist attack on India's Parliament. Meanwhile, President Bush withdraws America from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.
- December 22: The "Shoe Bomber," Richard Reid, attempts to destroy an American airliner in flight, but is thwarted.

Audition ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Based on a story by Ryu Murakami, *Audition* starts off as something like a romantic comedy, and ends up as one of the most spine-chilling and gruesome movies you'll ever see. In fact, it is this schizophrenic nature that makes it even more effective as arthouse horror. Director Takashi Miike blends beauty and revulsion with so deft a hand that you feel hypnotized by the one even as the other compels you to turn away in disgust."—Parama Chaudhury, *Film Monthly*, August 3, 2001.

"Suffice it to say this is not a movie for the faint of heart or the weak of stomach. But *Audition* has problems besides those that lie in the audience's constitution for soldiering through the explicit violence."—Rob Blackwelder, *Splicedwire*, "Demure & Deadly: Skillful, Sexual, Stylish *Audition* over-graphic yet underwhelming art house horror from Japan." 2001.

Takashi Miike's *Audition* still feels like the most visceral and evocative horror film since Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. There are commonalities between the movies as well, as both are still discussed with a degree of skittish awe—almost as if they're radioactive—and both bend narrative expectations to reveal social fault lines."—Chuck Bowen, *Slant Magazine*: "Takashi Miike's *Audition* Remains a Furious Howl of Despair," July 1, 2019.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Ryo Ishibashi (Shigeharu Aoyama); Eihi Shiina (Asami Yamazaki); Tetsu Sawaki (Shigehiko Aoyama); Jun Kunimura (Yasuhisa Yoshikawa); Renji Ishibashi (Old Man in the Wheelchair); Miyuki Matsuda (Ryoko Aoyama); Toshie Negishi (Rie); Ren Osugi (Shimada); Shigeru Saiki (Toastmaster); Ken Mitsuishi (Director); Yuriko Hirooka (Michiyo Yanagida).

CREW: American Cinematheque, Basara Pictures, Creators Company Connection and Omega Project presents *Audition*. Production Designer: Tasuo Ozeki. Costume Designer: Tomoe Kumagai, Special Effects: Yuichi Matsui. Music: Koji Endo. Director of Photography: Hideo Yamamoto. Film Editor: Yasushi Shimamura. Producers: Satoshi Fukushima, Akemi Suyama. Executive Producer: Toyoyuki Yokohama. Based on the novel by: Ryu Murakami. Written by: Daisuke Tengan. Directed by: Takashi Miike. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 115 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Seven years after the death of his wife, a dispirited widower, Aoyama (Ishibashi) is encouraged by his son, Shigehiko (Sawaki) to remarry. Aoyama's friend, Yoshikawa (Kunimura) works in the movie industry in Japan and suggests that they audition women for the role of Aoyama's wife, pretending that it is for a high-profile film role. The auditions go forward, and Aoyama picks a woman he is interested in, Asami (Shiina), though Yoshikawa senses that something is off with her. Aoyama begins a romantic relationship with the woman but learns that Asami's pathologies run deep. One night, the possessive Asami goes to Aoyama's house and, after paralyzing him, begins to torture him, amputating a foot with a saw, and sticking needles in his face.

COMMENTARY: *Audition* provides the perfect mirror for how one views issues of gender in the 21st century. Some critics insist the film is strongly misogynist because it positions an unstable woman as the villain or boogeyman, one who tortures men. Oppositely, others view the film as strongly feminist in perspective, since the men in the film behave badly, and it is their transgression and dishonesty which spurs the violence in Asami. This author prefers the latter reading and sees *Audition* as historically of a piece with other 2000s era films which depict men treating women poorly, such as *What Lies Beneath*,

Gothika, or *Deadgirl*. All these films are part of the same trend or direction in horror, despite cultural differences.

Why this viewpoint? Why not view the film as misogynist, since Asami is clearly psychotic and dangerous? Well, it is clear that, whatever her mental pathology, Asami arrived at that particular and unhappy state because of her treatment at the hands of men behaving badly. Additionally, it is difficult to deny that Aoyama goes along quite willingly with the ruse of a movie audition to pick a wife, cruelly playing on the hopes and aspirations of the actresses his trick ensnares. It is simultaneously true that Aoyama is a nice guy; a mild-mannered fellow, and no villain. But this fact seems only to prove the very point up for debate here, regarding society and its patriarchal leanings. Even a man as nice, humane and caring as Aoyama is willing to go along with a terrible and destructive lie to get what he wants from a woman: a new wife. Aoyama has the good sense to feel like a criminal for participating in the deception, but not the good sense, apparently, to prevent it from happening. He doesn't refuse to participate. That's the transgression.

Audition thus belongs in the “*cosmic scales of justice balanced*” sub-genre of horror films. The instigating event for terror is a transgression on the protagonist's part. Basically, the hero does something wrong, and pays the price for their misbehavior. In this case, Aoyama just hopes that there is a “*nice woman out hiding somewhere*” for him, and he finds a sweet, demure woman, but one who comes to love him obsessively, and dangerously.

It should further be added that another subplot reveals that Aoyama wears self-centered glasses, or blinders. In his office, there is an attractive female co-worker who would clearly pursue a relationship with him, but Aoyama would rather pursue Asami. Why? She abundantly fits a pre-standing bias in terms of what he and society consider desirable and attractive elements in a female. Again, Asami is demure, athletic, and an artist. She dances ballet and plays classical piano. By inference, what Aoyama does not seek or desire is a professional or working woman who might challenge him professionally or function on his level. Indeed, Aoyama's biases and sexist behavior and desires are the things that lead him to his damnation with Asami, if one reads the tea leaves. *Audition* isn't misogynist because it clearly exposes Aoyama's blind-spots and myopic thinking in terms of what he thinks he wants and needs from a wife.

None of this commentary is meant to suggest that Aoyama is a horrible person. The film depicts a very kind, loving relationship between Aoyama and his son, for example. The audience cares about him. He is not a bad person, but like so many people, also doesn't see or register how his behavior impacts others, or hurts others. Toxic masculinity—there's that phrase again—is seen in a number of horror films of the 2000s, but what Aoyama's general decency (and unthinking misogyny) seems to prove is that many men walk around utterly unaware of how their behavior, their choices, and their desires impact the women in their lives. According to *The Encyclopedia of Japanese Horror Films*, there is a moral ambiguity to the character:

He is presented as a lonely, sympathetic character, and by all measures a thoughtful and caring father who nevertheless participates in orchestrating the fraudulent audition. The film's hallucinatory sequences also reveal his subliminal evaluations of women based on sexual criteria... [S]ome interpret the film as a tale of female revenge against male chauvinism, particularly in professional settings and that Asami's acts of torture are symbolic of castration.³

Again, the film's viewpoint seems straight-forward and clear: Aoyama is one of the good ones and—still—look at how badly he behaves. He is compared and contrasted in the film, for example, with the man that seems to have caused Asami's traumas and pathologies in the first place, an abusive ballet instructor. The audience registers that character as a true monster, but what of Aoyama's participation in the deceitful audition ruse? Doesn't that put him in the same category as the ballet instructor?

Asami has been described by critics as both “insane” and as a “*feminist avenger*.” Many writers have observed her change in wardrobe as well and read much into that. In the audition, Asami wears white, a color associated with virginity and Japanese ideals of femininity, but by film's end she is garbed in black rubber, indicative of a turn, naturally, to the dark, perverse side. Writer Kathryn Hemmann describes the significance of the wardrobe in her essay “Illusion, Reality and Fearsome Femininity in Takashi

Miike's *Audition*:

The persona that Asami displays during the eponymous audition and continues to promote ... is modelled after the 'traditional' Japanese ideal of femininity promoted by the government during the Meiji period (1868–1912) and perpetuated during the Showa period (1926–1989) through the medium of home dramas. As numerous literary and cinematic works from both periods suggest, the ideal of respectable femininity embodied by the demure and obedient young woman who marries to become the 'good wife, wise mother' (*ryosai kenbo*) was never anything more than an artificial image created by a patriarchal society and adopted by numerous women hoping to succeed within their societal environment by conforming to gender roles.⁴

If this is indeed the case, then one must consider that both Asami and Aoyama are victims of their own false beliefs in the film. Asami believes that she must present herself in a certain way to be accepted by society, and by men. She can't present that way authentically, because of her history of abuse, so she always feels "less worthy" than the image she wears. Aoyama, meanwhile, has been seduced by an image to the extent that he believes Asami represents what he wants in a companion. They are both deceived by a society's determination to foster a monolithic ideal of beauty and behavior that everyone, male or female, must subscribe to.

Audition is notorious for its last act, which stands as of the most horrific in the history of cinema. Asami takes her unique torture kit to Aoyama, sticking needles under his eyes, and sawing off an appendage (no, not that one). She tells him that "*Words create lies. Pain can be trusted.*" This line in particular, carries resonance and relevance, since Aoyama has lied to her and put her through the fake audition. He has led her to believe she could star in a movie. He can only be trusted when he feels pain, she concludes. Pain, Asami believes (from her own traumatic experience) will foster honesty. The torture scene is grotesque, extended, and quite uncomfortable. It grows even more so, however, when Aoyama's son arrives, and Asami threatens to harm him as well. Unlike either Asami or Aoyama, the young man seems free of dysfunction and pathology, perhaps because, although he is just a few years younger than Asami, he has not been indoctrinated with the same imagery that, finally, imprisons his father, and his would-be stepmother.

Audition possesses a perhaps unfortunate reputation among some "geek" horror fans as a kind of dare movie. These fans interpret the film as a torture porn type film, and to make it through the final act torture sequence with eyes open is some kind of horror nerd benchmark. All these fans see here is a torture scene extraordinaire, a kind of gauntlet to endure. Yet to view *Audition* on such limited terms is to fail to recognize the artistry of the film, particularly in its strange lighting scheme (which seems to zigzag from icy blue, to hot red, to sick ochre), and in its commentary about, how, perhaps, a society's propaganda, if believed, can harm men and women alike.

In the end, Asami and Aoyama both seem victims of misogyny, and a misogyny wrought intentionally by government.

Bones ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"The plot barely registers apart from Snoop Dogg's vengeful spirit—something about kids wanting to open a hip-hop club in his old stomping grounds—but Dogg is just terrific; he makes the film. His restless, gut-chomping super-pimp-from-Hell is a great character and Dogg swaggers through the film in a floor-length, fur-collared outfit that would put Huggy Bear to shame. With his smooth-as-smoke voice and street-strutting panache, Dogg has the makings of a genuinely great actor. When he's on screen the film crackles, and even when he's not it's a trippy, funhouse ride."—Marc Savlov, *The Austin Chronicle*, October 26, 2001.

"It is obvious, by the limited role Snoop actually played, that the director was aware of their star's lack of talent. Most of his lines consisted of the pimpology that can be heard on any of his albums, such as 'It's a dog eat dog world, brotha.' However, the plot managed to shine through the weak acting. Unlike the past dozen horror films, *Bones* was actually unpredictable and original. And let's be honest folks, most of us don't go to

see horror films for the great acting or well-developed plot anyways. Our objective is to be scared by watching obscene amounts of blood and gore. And here is where *Bones* succeeds. The visual effects of this movie, complete with maggots, talking heads, and a man-eating dog, is what leaves moviegoers feeling satisfied, or at least nauseous.”—Ashley Robinson, *The Tech*: “Chilled to the Bones,” November 2, 2001.

“Unforgivably bad.... *Bones* squanders all its good will on cheap shocks, bad acting, poor special effects, annoying character and implausible situations. Expect endless direct-to-video sequels for years to come.”—Carl Cortez, *Cinescape*, Issue #56, January 2002, page 22.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Snoop Dogg (Jimmy Bones); Pam Grier (Pearl); Michael T. Weiss (Lupovich); Clifton Powell (Jeremiah Peet); Ricky Harris (Eddie Mack); Bianca Lawson (Cynthia); Khalil Kain (Patrick); Merwin Mondesir (Bill); Sean Amsing (Maurice); Katharine Isabelle (Tia); Ronald Selmour (Shotgun); Deezer D (Stank); Garikayi Mutambirwa (Weaze); Erin Wright (Snowflake); Josh Byer (Jason).

CREW: New Line Cinema and The Lloyd Segal Company, in association with Heller Highwater Productions presents *Bones*. Casting: Anya Colloff, Jennifer Fishman, Amy McIntyre Britt. Production Designer: Douglas Higgins. Costume Designer: Dana Campbell. Special Effects: Pixel Magic, No Prisoners 3DFX LLC, Tony Gardner and Alterian, WCT Productions. Music: Ella Cmiral. Director of Photography: Flavio Labiano. Film Editors: Michael N. Knue, Stephen Lovejoy. Producers: Rupert Harvey, Peter Heller, Lloyd Segal. Executive Producer: Carolyn Manetti. Written by: Adam Simon, Tim Metcalfe. Directed by: Ernest Dickerson M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1979, Jimmy Bones (Dogg) is a gangster, but one who runs his neighborhood so that it is a safe place for children to grow up. Bones is betrayed and murdered by a white cop, Lupovich (Weiss) and people in his own inner circle, including Jeremiah (Powell) and his girlfriend, Pearl (Grier). In 2001, Jeremiah's children, Patrick (Kain), Bill (Mondesir) and Tia (Isabelle), their white stepsister, attempt to revitalize Bones' old neighborhood by opening up a nightclub with a Jimmy Bones theme. Bones' spirit, however, wants vengeance, and wants to be resurrected to right the scales of cosmic justice. Patrick falls for Cynthia (Lawson), Pearl's daughter, who harbors a secret connection to the late gangster.

COMMENTARY: *Bones* is a rubber-reality, revenge-from-beyond-the-grave, black-exploitation horror film in the spirit of *J.D.'s Revenge* (1976). Snoop Dog's villainous avenger, Jimmy Bones, is a Freddy Krueger-type character capable of orchestrating supernatural vengeance upon those who wronged him. Specific scenes with a black dog (which harbors Bones' spirit) recall *A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master* (1988), and *Bones* even gets a jump-rope song in the spirit of Freddy's. Another flesh-shedding scene seems to evoke *Hellraiser* (1987).

Such genre references reveal what type of horror film this is: one in which a supernatural avenger rewrites reality to destroy his victims. Yet they don't reveal the entire story, or the film's entire tapestry. *Bones* is a narrative about the sins of the father revisited upon the children. It is a generational tale that involves betrayal of the community, and finally, one's self. As portrayed in the film, Jimmy Bones is a charismatic gangster. He's a criminal, but one with a heart of gold. One might even conclude that he is a Civil Rights leader of sorts, since he protects his neighborhood from the influence of hard drugs. One might say that in the 1970s, a time of rampant crime, he is a responsible bulwark against societal trends and influences that would harm his neighborhood. But, forecasting the avarice and greed is good aesthetic that would come to represent the 1980s, he is betrayed and murdered over money. The white cop, Lupovich, wants to bring drugs into the community, and has to get rid of Bones to do so. Jeremiah, perhaps the key figure in the film, agrees to go along with Lupovich, since he will be paid for doing so.

Jump forward to the 21st century and Jeremiah is a rich, comfortable, yuppie, living in the suburbs. He sold out his friend, and his neighborhood so that he could escape and succeed. Bones' murder guaranteed his upward mobility. Considering this dynamic, *Bones* is both a critique of white corruption in the black community (represented by the avaricious Lupovich), and black collusion with

that corruption. Jeremiah thought only of himself, and his own well-being, not anyone else. He sold out his neighborhood for wealth. This makes him a yuppie, of course, but more than that, it makes him a traitor to the black community. After betraying Bones in a Judas-like fashion, Jeremiah gets to live the high life, and his children do, as well. They do not even know that their home, their education, their affluence, all flow directly from poison fruit; from their father's corruption. They return to the neighborhood, finally, in a way, to gentrify it. To make a profit with a business that is themed after the mythic Jimmy Bones. But they don't really understand who Bones was, or what he stood for. Or why what they are doing is exploitive of the old neighborhood. There's a lot to unpack there, in terms of recent American history, African American neighborhoods, and the fall-out from the decade of Reagan. *Bones* isn't deep or profound about all this, but by using this historical context as backdrop, the film feels deeper than its screenplay suggests, at least at times.

The genre's rubber reality king, Freddy Krueger, is a child murderer who comes back from the grave to punish those who murdered him. He was a bad person on this mortal coil, and a bad person in the afterlife. Jimmy Bones, while utilizing some familiar Krueger-esque rubber-reality tricks, is not so easily parsed in black-and-white. Yes, he was a criminal. But he possessed, in life, a code of ethics. Importantly, Jimmy Bones was murdered for that code of ethics. Although Bones' is the film's villain and boogeyman, he is not someone who was a monster in life. Rather, he was a leader in a way that his community needed a leader at that time. Patrick, Bill and the others have come up in a different world, a world of entrepreneurs and the suburbs, and so can't understand Bones' legacy. Bones represents America before Reagan; the family America after Reagan. The dream of fame and wealth, and entrepreneurship has touched everything in this new world.

None of this commentary is meant to suggest that *Bones* is high-brow, or even particularly serious. But the film features deep social undercurrents that comment on both the 1970s, and the 2000s. At the same time, it is undeniably entertaining in the way that pays homage,—as a good old school rubber-reality film—to the heyday of Freddy Krueger and Pinhead. The film features memorable set-pieces (including the villainous Lupovich hanged on a meat hook), and Jeremiah pays for his crime too. This Judas is tossed into a hellscape of coruscating, goop-covered human bodies. "*Time for you to collect your interest,*" Bones' quips as he dispatches the man who sold his soul just to get rich. Again, note how the character's fate is tied to business or finance, because that's the undercurrent of *Bones*.

Snoop Dogg is front and center in *Bones*, which may account for the film's negative reception upon release. At the time, casting the rapper may have looked like a stunt to most critics. In the years since its release, the film has been re-evaluated, and found to be of better quality than original reviews indicate. Snoop Dogg deserves the same re-evaluation. He is a charismatic screen presence, and a funny one. But more than that, he is able to create here a boogeyman that is both frightening and sympathetic, especially given his back story. A role like this one needs a larger than life figure, and Dogg fits the bill. On one hand it's a shame that no *Bones* sequels followed this film, but on the other hand, Jimmy Bones gets his revenge, and against the right people (those that wronged him) in this film. It would diminish the character, in some way, to keep bringing him back to terrorize teens unrelated to his particular story.

Another reason why *Bones* may look refreshing today, aside from the virtuoso directorial chops of the great Ernest Dickerson, is the fact that even though it concerns something serious, *Bones* is funny. It's amusing. It doesn't feel the need to be grim and brooding all the time. So many horror films of the 2000s lost the aspect of fun that 1980s horror classics embodied (think: *Fright Night*, *Return of the Living Dead*, *Evil Dead II*, and *Dream Warriors*). *Bones* features some serious issues involving the African American community, and the American dream and its legacy from 1979 (the last year before Reaganism) to 2001 (Reaganism's triumphant return in George W. Bush's election), but it is also confident enough to be amusing and silly.

Today, that mixture of humor with rubber-reality alone feels like a valid reason to re-assess the film. The film is built on some sturdy bones, after all.

Donnie Darko * * * *

Critical Reception

"The Escher-style popular metaphysics I can take with a pinch of salt. But bearing in mind that it was first screened long before 11 September, *Donnie Darko* does have a certain timeliness, both in its apprehension of catastrophe (though that has been a hardy perennial in the annals of screen paranoia) and in its picture of the systematic closing of the American mind. Not only is Richard Kelly's film a sharp antidote to the recent banalities of commercial high-school farce, but it's an American teenage comedy genuinely motivated by rage, with a rebel hero who's actually an intellectual. These days, that's about as subversive as it gets."—Jonathan Romney, *The Independent*: "Morbid, Eighties surrealism. Lovely," October 27, 2002, page 11.

"*Donnie Darko* blends multiple genres in distinctive ways. There is the teen genre, with its coming-of-age narrative; there is science-fiction/fantasy, including the notion of time travel; and there is gothic horror, as in the scenes with Donnie and Frank the giant rabbit (James Duval). There is also a strong element of social realism in the representation of a particular time and place. The film offers a sharp satire of Middle America in 1988, at the end of the Reagan era, which saw the gap between rich and poor grow wider, economic downturn and social decay, as well as an escalation of the Cold War. The presence of the 'Moral Majority' is felt in the dominant values of Smalltown USA. Kitty Farmer (Beth Grant), the health and human relations teacher, the charlatan Jim Cunningham (Patrick Swayze), and the Middlesex principal (David Moreland) all espouse the conservative values that proscribe drugs, alcohol and premarital sex."—Gary Simmons, *Screen Education*: "WHERE'S DONNIE?" It's Neither Here Nor There: Ideas for Teaching 'Donnie Darko,'" Issue #45 (2007), pages 170–176.

"An extravagant pastiche of teen dramedy, gothic romance, period piece, supernatural fantasy, metaphysical thriller, music video, narrative puzzle, and more, the feature debut of 26-year-old writer-director Richard Kelly sent a dozen familiar genres head over heels through the looking glass. It verged, at times, on the unintelligible, but for certain members of the audience it was also unforgettable."—Nathan Lee, *The New York Sun*: "How *Donnie Darko* Refused to Die," July 20, 2004.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jake Gyllenhaal (Donnie Darko); Holmes Osborne (Eddie Darko); Maggie Gyllenhaal (Elizabeth Darko); Daveigh Chase (Samantha Darko); Mary McDonnell (Rose Darko); James Duval (Frank); Arthur Taxier (Dr. Fisher); Patrick Swayze (Jim Cunningham); Jena Malone (Gretchen Ross); Seth Rogen (Ricky Danforth); Drew Barrymore (Karen Pomeroy); Noah Wyle (Professor Monnitoff); Patience Cleveland (Grandma Death); Katharine Ross (Dr. Lillian Thurman); Ashley Tisdale (Kim); Fran Kranz (Passenger); Mark Hoffman (Police Officer); David St. James (Bob Garland); Tom Tangen (Man in Red Jogging Suit); Jazzie Mahannah (Joanie James); Jolene Purdy (Cherita Chen); Stuart Stone (Ronald Fisher); Gary Lundy (Sean Smith).

CREW: Arrow Films, Pandora Cinema, a Flower Films Production, Adam Fields Productions and Gaylord films Presents *Donnie Darko*. Casting: Joseph Middleton, Michelle Morris Gertz. Production Designer: Alexander Hammond. Costume Designer: April Ferry. Special Effects: Amalgamated Pixels, The Effects Group. Music: Michael Andrews. Director of Photography: Steven Poster. Film Editors: Sam Bauer, Eric Strand. Producers: Adam Fields, Sean Mc-Kittrick. Executive Producers: Chris J. Ball, Drew Barrymore, Casey La Scala, Hunt Lowry, Aaron Ryder, William Tyrer. Written and Directed by: Richard Kelly. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 117 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In October of 1988 as the Presidential race between George Bush and Michael Dukakis nears its end, a troubled Virginia teenager, Donnie Darko (Gyllenhaal), narrowly escapes a strange death when a jet engine falls from the sky and destroys his bedroom. Fortunately, Donnie was sleep-walking at the time of the accident and survives unscathed. The jet engine, however, is a mystery. It seems to have no origin, and has actually created a time paradox, a new "Tangent Universe" that if not repaired, will consume the prime universe in twenty-eight days. Only Donnie's death—which should have occurred to begin with—will set the universe right, a fact he increasingly becomes aware of, in part through a strange book written by a neighbor, "Grandma Death," called *The Philosophy of Time Travel*. In the twenty-eight days until the end of the world, Donnie encounters a self-help guru and charlatan,

Jim Cunningham (Swayze), learns from a pair of kindly teachers (Barrymore, Noah Wyle), and falls in love with a beautiful girl who has just relocated to Virginia, named Gretchen (Malone). He is also visited periodically by a creepy cyborg bunny man, Frank (Duval), who seems to have knowledge of the future, and Donnie's fate. Working with a psychologist (Ross), Donnie must determine who is he, and what kind of future he wants for the world.

COMMENTARY: Every teenager believes that the world revolves around him or her, and if one considers it, there's some truth in this belief. After all, human beings understand the world through the prism of *their eyes*, and when they die, the world they have created, seen, and experienced dies with them. The end of the world is, literally, an *individual* death. Given this fact, the world ends for millions of people every single day. Every moment, every instant, another apocalypse occurs and a whole universe dies out, going down in flames of annihilation. The 2001 cult film *Donnie Darko* remembers this basic human truth regarding teenagers and makes it hauntingly literal. The film's ambivalent hero, Donnie reckons with the impending end of the world in twenty-eight days due to the unexpected creation of a dangerous "*Tangent Universe*." It's a catastrophic ending of the cosmos itself that only Donnie can prevent because he's at the center of the paradox that created that universe in the first place. He can escape his teenage "tunnel vision" and save the world, or he can die—along with everyone else—a prisoner of anger and fear.



Night of the Lepus! A dark figure in a twisted bunny costume haunts Donnie in *Donnie Darko* (2001).

Donnie Darko also concerns the universal loneliness of adolescence, and Donnie's fear that, in death, that loneliness will linger for eternity. He doesn't want to be alone, and at the same time he doesn't fully understand how to connect with others. The universe itself, or in the film's lingo, "God's Channel," must help Donnie understand the paradox if it is to continue to exist at all. The Richard Kelly film thus takes an anti-social kid on a strange journey of self-discovery and, in the end, transforms him into a superhero of sorts, as witnessed by his alliterative name, one who eventually embraces life and connection right before it all ends, at least for him. In seeing his world end, however, Donnie experiences an epiphany. He comes to finally recognize that "*destruction is a form of creation*," to quote the film. His ending—his death—creates a new beginning for his family, his girlfriend, and the whole of the human race. He laughs madly immediately preceding his death, because only at the end can he recognize God's plan for him.

Byzantine, mysterious, and hypnotic, *Donnie Darko* is a masterpiece in so many ways. It is unnervingly creepy, especially in the seemingly sinister presence of Doomsday's Herald, a giant robot bunny-thing called Frank. The film is also unfailingly funny in its observations about human life, especially in confronting the fact that many people, like Jim Cunningham (Patrick Swayze) thrive not by understanding life in all its glorious complexity, but by reducing it to easy-to-digest platitudes, like a

lifeline with “fear” on one end of the spectrum and “love” on the other. All shades of gray fall on distinct points between.

Donnie Darko deserves serious consideration as a great work of art because the film dwells in that expressive world of the Tangent Universe, a world where the “*manipulated living*” and the “*manipulated dead*”—and even the foundations of reality itself—conspire to lead Donnie towards his heroic apotheosis. This universe of influences and messages is presented in the film through representative symbols that viewers must translate and interpret. This task fosters engagement in the story, and sympathy for Donnie. These visual representations, from movie marquees to allusions to great literature, conform to the highest aesthetic criteria in terms of film criticism. Their presence means that the form’s visual content reflects its narrative content, and augments that content. *Donnie Darko* is about what it means to grow up and to leave childish things behind, in the truest sense of that phrase. And primary among those childish things is *the tunnel vision of ego*, the desire to always put one’s self first. Overcoming this tunnel-vision is not easy, because we all see the world through our own individual prism. In reckoning with this idea, *Donnie Darko* concerns not just a time paradox, but the human paradox

At one point in *Donnie Darko*, Donnie and his teacher (Wyle) debate the basics of fate, free will and God’s plan. Donnie has rejected religion and God because of his fear that “*every living creature on Earth dies alone*.” Given this fact, he says the search for God is nothing less than “*absurd*.” However, Donnie also makes the observation that man may possess free will to a degree within “*God’s Channel*,” and the movie implies that God’s channel actually involves this tangent, apparently accidental universe. In other words, Donnie is bestowed a grace period of 28 days to fall in love, reconcile his “*emotional problems*” with his family, and overcome his fear of isolation and death. He was meant by design and predestination to die when the jet engine crashed in his room. That death still occurs, only later. But Donnie is able to finally, in the end, face it with a sense of grace and purpose because of this interval and what he learns during it. God (or the universe, perhaps), grants Donnie a chance to settle the outstanding issues of his life before he leaves the mortal coil. The forces of nature (or God) surrounding Donnie, *which desire to continue existing*, thus spend 28 days sending Donnie the signals and messages he needs to accept and embrace his fate. Grandma Death’s time travel book calls this messaging “the ‘*insurance [sic] trap*,’” but it isn’t exactly a trap. The manipulated living and the manipulated dead want to survive and want Donnie to sacrifice himself so that the universe continues to exist, but it isn’t a malevolent or diabolical kind of trap. Instead, in Donnie’s case, the messages must heal his paranoid schizophrenia, his “*increased detachment*” from the world, and replace it with a psyche that sees and recognizes the beauty in human life and connection, and is willing to sacrifice itself for the species, indeed for all creation.

Donnie’s journey is expressed through a number of symbols. These symbols represent messages. In one of these, Donnie writes and presents a poem to his English class in which he envisions himself as the savior of children everywhere during an approaching storm. In one sense, this is an allusion to *Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger’s 1951 novel in which another teen protagonist, Holden Caulfield, imagined himself a savior of innocence. In a much more literal sense, the poem represents Donnie’s subconscious understanding of his role in preserving life on Earth. The film also deliberately positions Donnie as a Christ figure. A theater marquee pictured on-screen at one point shows a unique double bill: *The Evil Dead* (1983) and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Those films seem very different, indeed, yet they represent the totality of Donnie’s journey. That odyssey begins with all kinds of fear. There is fear of the returning dead—*embodied by the herald, Frank*—and fear of death. But the journey ascends to an apex in which Donnie willingly lays down his life for all of mankind, even though it is sinful life, as clearly embodied by Cunningham, Frank, and others.

Christ’s temptation by Satan in the Scorsese film involved the Devil showing him the mortal life and pleasures he would miss by selecting death on the cross. That mortal life included love, lust, and other earthbound wonders. Donnie, like Christ, actually *increases* his connection to humanity by experiencing in a kind of vision all those things he will later miss. He experiences a personal epiphany or vision of love, brotherhood, human connection, and sex. This vision, though, doesn’t force either

Christ or Donne to make the wrong choice. Rather, it emboldens each to see the beauty in *all life* and wish to preserve it for others. Again, this realization comes back to the idea that Donnie exists within, not outside, God's channel. God gives him twenty-eight days to see the beauty of life, and therefore the desire to preserve it, even if he can't share in its beauty beyond that span. The theater marquee represents a visual bookending of the journey. Life can be like *The Evil Dead*, where friends and lovers become enemies, and there is only ugliness and death. Or it can be like *The Last Temptation of Christ*, where the beauty of life leads one to make a sacrifice for others. *Donnie Darko* explicitly discusses this concept when Barrymore's English teacher describes the God Machine, the *Deus Ex Machina*. This discussion raises our awareness that God has set this plan for Donnie into motion. Everything is pre-determined, though as Donnie debates, there is some room for free-will within that channel of pre-determination.

Donnie Darko offers a complex, if spiritual vision of existence. There is such a thing as free will, states the filmmaker, but it involves movement only within a tunnel of certain possibilities. Donnie's understanding of this, ironically, comes from Cunningham's ridiculous self-help lifeline, which simplifies the world to two axes, "*fear*" and "*love*." Donnie responds angrily to the lifeline that "*life isn't that simple*," and yet in a way it is. Donnie explicitly moves from fear to love in the 28 days of the Tangent Universe, but the important thing is that he does so under the auspices of his *own intellect*. He learns how to maneuver, individually, through that channel. Some might assert that's the key to leading a good life.

Donnie Darko also seems absolutely obsessed with the Bush/Dukakis electoral battle of 1988. The film shows the two candidates debate on television screens, and there is also mention of Dukakis on the radio. Donnie's sister, Elizabeth (Maggie Gyllenhaal), declares that she is voting for Dukakis, over her parents' objections, at the family dinner table, and the legend "*vote Dukakis*" appears on the Darko refrigerator in the Tangent Universe. These moments amount to more than establishing the film's time period or setting, October 1988. All the allusions to the presidential election seem more important than that. An election is a choice between possible futures, between *possible universes*. When an election ends, one of those universes—a *tangent universe*?—collapses while the other universe continues, unabated. If *Donnie Darko* doesn't comment overtly on the specific candidates and their attributes, it certainly comments on the nature of choice and free will. For every affirmative choice we make, a whole universe is destroyed. When we pick Bush, the Dukakis universe dies. Again, this goes back to the film's paradigm that even in destruction, there is creation. In the film, Donnie's parents ask Elizabeth something along the lines of: "*do you really think that Dukakis can keep this country safe?*" It's a question that might very well be asked of Donnie at this juncture too. Can a horny, self-obsessed teenage boy save the world? The point is that people will *never know* if Dukakis would have been a good president and kept the country safe, just as, following the fall of the Tangent Universe, nobody knows of Donnie's sacrifice for humanity. Again, I'm not suggesting a pro-Dukakis slant on the part of the filmmakers, only the idea that universes are born and die every day, and we never know where the path not taken might lead. The doorway to tangent universes closes and moves outside God's channel of options.

The film also concerns messages sent from an outside intelligence. They arrive in our reality, it seems, and people either decide to note them and heed them or choose not to. *Donnie Darko* is a film filled with messages, often conveyed in writing and broadcast notably within the confines of the frame. These messages include "*Vote Dukakis*," which is a message about saving the universe that people *don't* see, and having faith that even untested, disliked people will do the right thing (like Donnie does the right thing when given the chance). The messages include the theater marquee, advertising "*Evil Dead*," and "*Last Temptation of Christ*," a duality which explains Donnie's journey from psychological torture and fear to self-sacrifice and redemption. Another message is "*cellar door*," a legend which appears on the blackboard in Donnie's English class, and paves the way for Donnie to understand how to proceed at a critical juncture. Jim Cunningham's lifeline showing the "fear"/"love" continuum is another on-screen message, literally spelled-out. The recognition of "Poetry Day," when Donnie reads his story about saving children might be considered another. There's even the signage "His Name is Frank" which validates Donnie's belief in his phantasm of the Bunny. All these words—*these messages*—appear on

screen in the film, and the filmmaker asks the audience to consider them and interpret their meanings, at the same time Donnie must do so.

At the end of the film, Donnie must decide if a world that creates weird kiddie entertainment like Sparkle Motion should continue to exist. Or if a world that allows men like sexual predator Jim Cunningham to become successful and admired should be allowed to continue. Or if a world that bans quality books in favor of self-help pabulum deserves a second chance. The answer, of course, is that despite all the confusion and ugliness, this is the same (mad) world that offers unconventional beauty, as we see in Cherita's talent show dance. It's the same world that allows Donnie to connect with the wounded Gretchen. It's the same world that can make a superhero—or savior—out of a confused teenager who likes to masturbate a lot. In it all, there is a plan ... and beauty to. Donnie's journey—and the film's view of life, is best expressed in the lyrics to the song, "Mad World," which accompany the film's final, elegiac montage. The lyrics assert: "*And I find it kind of funny, I find it kind of sad, that the dream in which I'm dying are the best I've ever had....*"

Donnie's last twenty eight days—a *waking dream from which he finally does not awake*—represent the best part of his life; the span in which he stopped being an "*anger prisoner*" and instead began to see life in all its multi-faceted complexity, a complexity that involved both ugliness and beauty. Human beings sometimes miss just how beautiful life really is. We "*run in circles*" instead of paying attention to the things that matter. *Donnie Darko* is like a teacher explaining this "*lesson*." The film is thus one-part English Lit, one-part spooky horror film, one-part Quantum Physics, and one-part spiritual passion play.

Yet it all fits together beautifully. For the open-minded, for intellectually engaged, *Donnie Darko* is a one-of-a-kind experience.

The Forsaken ★ ★

Critical Reception

"This is a curious case of a vampire movie that comes up with an original take on the mythology, and then fails to integrate the concept into its plot in a meaningful way."—T.K. Merchant *Cinescape*, Issue #56, January 2002, page 29.

"This starts promisingly, with an unusual variation on vampire mythology. The writer/director then squanders his wayward energies on repetitive, ham-fisted action and boring violence. Pretty boy actors Smith and Fehr fared better in *Final Destination*; the mostly mute Miko lets her body do the talking; the sharp cheek-boned Schaech and his striking black sidekick, Phina Oruche, exude the louche, sexless appeal of slumming fashion models."—*Time Out*, 2001, https://www.timeout.com/en_gb/film/the-forsaken

"In the new millennium, audiences demand a bit more than the third male leads from *Dawson's Creek* (Kerr Smith), *Roswell* (Brendan Fehr), and *Jack & Jill* (Simon Rex). Yet that's all this startlingly amateurish vampire tale has to offer in the way of star power—or anything else. Smith, an actor whose emotional range runs the gamut from petulant to snippy, pouts wanly as an aspiring Film Editor who stumbles across a gang of bloodsuckers while driving cross country."—Bruce Fette, *Entertainment Weekly*, updated March 20, 2020.

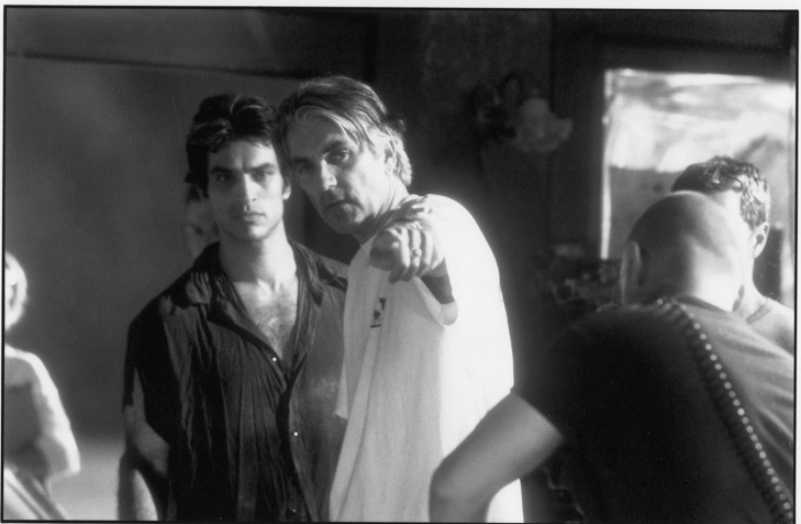
Cast & Crew

CAST: Kerr Smith (Sean); Brendan Fehr (Nick); Simon Rex (Pen); Carrie Snodgrass (Hamm); Jonathan Schaech (Kit); Izabella Miko (Megan); Cym (Ohina Oruche).

CREW: Screen Gems presents a Sandstorm Films production of a J.S. Cardone film, *The Forsaken*. Casting: Ferne Cassel. Costume Designer: Ernesto Martinez. Production Designer: Martina Buckley. Director of Photography: Steven Bernstein. Music: Johnny Lee Schell, Tim Jones. Producers: Scott Eibender, Carol Kottenbrook. Film Editor: Norman Buckley. Written and Directed by: J.S. Cardone. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young film editor in Hollywood, Sean (Smith), takes a job driving a Mercedes to Miami, so he can get to his sister's wedding. Along the way, he picks up a hitchhiker, Nick (Brendan Fehr), and a sick girl, Megan (Miko), while also running afoul of a dangerous gang led by the psychotic Kit (Schaech). As Nick soon reveals, Kit and his gang are vampires, and vampirism is actually a sickness that can be controlled through a home-made drug cocktail. When Sean is bitten by the infected Megan, Nick recruits him to kill Kit, the source of the vampire virus infection.

COMMENTARY: *The Forsaken* feels very 1990s and definitely pre-9/11. It is a vampire movie that derives much of its look and vibe from far superior 80s and 90s films. The vampire southwest gothic is rightly associated with *Near Dark* (1987), and *John Carpenter's Vampires* (1998). These are movies in which vampires are more like desert rats, eking out an existence on desert highways and in desert motels, preying on those who happen on their out-of-the-way nests and haunts. Where *Near Dark* and *Vampires* showcase some verisimilitude—not all vampires and humans are the same apparent age, for instance—*The Forsaken* feels more like a pilot for a series on the CW or WB.



Two stills from the road-trip vampire movie *The Forsaken*. Top, from left: Nick (Brendan Fehr), Megan

(Izabella Miko) and Sean (Kerr Smith) try to outrun an undead terror. Bottom: Director J.S. Cardone (center, pointing) gives guidance to the leader of the vampires, Kit (Jonathan Schaech).

This is not an unimportant trend in 2000s horror. The WB was a new TV network in the late 90s, one that morphed into the CW in the 2000s, but whatever its moniker, the network was known for featuring programs that skewed young. The primary way they did so was by featuring attractive young actors in primary roles. In the 2000s those “hot” TV actors moved *en masse* into the horror genre. The term “WB Horror” was thus born. *The Forsaken* features three WB graduates in starring roles: Kerr Smith from *Dawson’s Creek*, Brendan Fehr from *Roswell*, and Simon Rex from *Jack and Jill* (1999–2001). Horror fans were vocal about the fact that these actors often seemed cast based on their super-model looks and bodies, rather than their talent. The complaints involving the horror genre involved, primarily, a sense of realism. A film populated almost entirely by budding Calvin Klein underwear models seemed to lose the verisimilitude required of the genre. Accordingly, *The Forsaken* occurs in a weird universe in which every major character looks to be between the ages of 20 and 25 and is unfailingly, athletically fit and gorgeous. The denouement even sets up a sequel—or a WB TV series?—with the two “buddies” heading out again on the road to hunt the master vampire. The set-up, with two gorgeous young men in a car together seeking monsters, seems like a protean version of the CW’s *Supernatural* (2005–2020).

Indeed, the team up between Fehr and Smith, and Smith’s previous performance as a gay character on *Dawson’s Creek*, led some critics and fans to suggest that the film is actually an in-the-closet gay romance. This point of view was expressed by author Joseph Howell in his online piece from 2013, “It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time”:

It’s incredibly obvious throughout the movie ... that Sean and Nick are in love with one another. They constantly hang around each other, grow more and more fond of one

another, and in the end, Sean decides to ride with Nick instead of being with Megan...[S]o as you can see, these two should be a couple, but the movie doesn’t have the guts to admit, even when it’s clear to the point of shouting out on the top of a mountain. Sean even spends three months looking for the guy.⁵

As Howell points out, the movie doesn’t do anything with this subplot, let alone acknowledge it. The film would have worked better, and felt more consistent, had it done so. For one thing, Megan is never developed as anything approaching a human being, or three-dimensional character. Instead, she is simply an obstacle for the boys to overcome together, threatening their stay in a motel, and at one point, stealing their car. She seems an afterthought, compared to the male relationships. At one point, Nick even cops to having stolen Sean’s wallet, and he barely blinks or is upset. More substantively, Sean’s relationship with Nick is the thing that changes his life. He never knew his Dad, who was in the movie business, but he has followed in his father’s footsteps, out of some sense of loyalty or need for approval. After meeting Nick, Sean stops living for the man who abandoned him, and finds his real desire: to hunt vampires with Nick.

What does *The Forsaken* add to horror movie vampire lore? The origin of the vampires, involving the Crusades, and a deal for immortality with a demon, isn’t particularly original, and the idea of vampirism being a disease of the blood comes right from *Near Dark*. However, *The Forsaken* does add the notion of vampirism being treatable, not curable, much like HIV. Nick is able to control the disease for years, in himself, using a special cocktail of drugs that suppresses the effects. This is also how he keeps Megan and Sean from turning into full-fledged blood suckers. Nick is able to lead a normal-ish life with the sickness under control, even as he always searched for the elusive cure, which comes from eliminating the blood-line source. Vampirism as AIDS metaphor is not bad, and *The Forsaken* adds at least one piece of that puzzle, even if it does very little with it.

In terms of horror, *The Forsaken* knowingly eschews most elements of the vampire genre. Instead, it is more a “road trip gone wrong” picture, with many car chases, and a final shoot-out confrontation between the humans and the vampires. Again, *Near Dark* may be a model, but *The Forsaken* falls far short of that mark, in part because it doesn’t have the courage to acknowledge Nick and Sean’s

relationship, and fully delve into the idea of alternative lifestyles, comparing vampirism and homosexuality as “outsider” lifestyles. At least if the movie had gone that more courageous route, it would not seem so derivative, or superficial.

It may not have been any scarier, but it would, certainly, have been smarter, or forward-thinking. As it stands, it's just silly, having forsaken substance for Calvin Klein strutting.

From Hell ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“...A bloody good time, for the most part.... One of the niftiest aspects of *From Hell* is the way it scatters clues that touch nearly every theory ever about the Ripper's identity. With *Dead Presidents* and *Menace II Society*, the Hughes brothers (Allen and Albert) have already demonstrated their facility for putting solid characters in unsavory situations. *From Hell* lets them tart things up with period touches. Yet the movie, while garishly suggestive, tones down the gore quotient. We imagine more than we actually see.”—Eleanor Ringel Gillespie, *The Atlanta Journal*: “Stylish retelling of Ripper's tale,” October 2001, page 7.

“*From Hell*, based on the graphic novel by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, posits a solution, but who is fingered as the murderer is less interesting than the film's depiction of the society that would allow such crimes to happen. If you can imagine *The X-Files* transported to Victorian England, you get a sense of what this is like... [The Hughes] visuals paint a stark contrast between the upper classes, largely immune from normal police procedure, and the lower classes at the mercy of not only the Ripper but more mundane criminals as well.... We're left wondering which is really from Hell: the Ripper or the society he inhabits.”—Daniel M. Kimmel, *Telegram and Gazette*: “Depp's *From Hell* a brutal, gripping flick,” October 19, 2001, page C3.

“*From Hell*.... Indeed. One woman's throat is lacerated before our eyes, another has her intestines wrapped around her neck, and a third's heart is thrown into a pot and boiled. I would have vomited; had I not been lulled into a coma by the pedestrian filmmaking that may leave Jack the Ripper dead and buried forever.

True, the visual design is morbidly breathtaking. Charles Dickens could not dream a murkier looking London. From the blood red clouds to the dark alleys, this London appears haunted in every way. Costume Designer Kym Barrett conceives a red dress for star Heather Graham that foreshadows doom by flowing down her body to a puddle, like a river of blood.

Unfortunately, these highlights cannot save the insipid storytelling that sabotages the film. Anyone who's seen the countless films about the Whitechapel Ripper will be two miles ahead of this film at all times. Even those who are completely unfamiliar with the case will catch on so quickly; they'll be playing with their cuticles for most of the running time.”—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Johnny Depp (Inspector Frederick Abberline); Heather Graham (Mary Kelly); Ian Holm (Sir William Gull); Robbie Coltrane (Sergeant Peter Godley); Ian Richardson (Sir Charles Warren); Jason Flemyng (Netley, the Coachman); Katrin Cartlidge (Dark Annie Chapman); Terrence Harvey (Benjamin Kidney); Susan Lynch (Liz Stride); Paul Rhys (Dr. Ferral); Lesley Sharp (Kate Eddowes); Estelle Skornick (Ada); Nicholas McGahey (Officer Bolt); Annabelle Papsion (Polly Nichols); Joanna Page (Ann Crook);

CREW: Twentieth Century-Fox and Underworld Entertainment presents *From Hell*. Casting: Joyce Gallie, Sally Osoba. Production Design: Martin Childs. Costume Designer: Kym Barrett. Special Effects: Digiscope, Illusion Arts, Magic Move GmbH, Millennium FX, Park Place Editing. Music: Trevor Jones. Director of Photography: Peter Deming. Film Editors: George Bowers, Dan Kebental. Producer: Don Murphy. Executive Producers: Thomas M. Hammel, Jane Hamsher, Albert and Allan Hughes, Amy Robinson. Based on the graphic novel by: Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell. Written by: Terry Hayes and Rafael Yglesias. Directed by: The Hughes Brothers. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 122 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Victorian England, Inspector Abberline (Depp), a widower and opium addict with a psychic ability, investigates a series of brutal prostitute murders in the Whitechapel. He is advised by Sir William Gull (Holm), a high-society doctor who can help him understand the medical nature of the murders. As the killer—Jack the Ripper—takes more victims, Abberline grows close to a prostitute, Mary Kelly (Graham), and comes to suspect that the Ripper Crimes are actually the full-fledged machinations of a secret society, a conspiracy of darkness.

COMMENTARY: The most rewarding way to approach *From Hell*, which is based on a graphic novel by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, is not as a horror movie featuring Jack the Ripper as the boogeyman. Instead, consider this sumptuously filmed and beautifully realized effort a road map to understanding our modern history, or in the film's in-universe chronology, *the future*.

In particular, *From Hell* charts a dark, pessimistic (western) world of conspiracy in which the rich manipulate and exploit the poor. It is a world in which nationalism thrives and immigrants are utilized as scapegoats, and one in which women's voices are silenced to protect a corrupt patriarchy. *From Hell* is a primer and prologue then, to the 20th century, and even the 21st century. In a very real sense, denizens of the 21st century, at least in America, are living an extension of the world imagined here.

On one hand, this material might be considered paranoid, positing dark forces manipulating events from behind on the scenes. On the other hand, movements including Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo have exposed systemic injustice in the west, and America in particular. And MAGA has, oppositely, exposed the nativist underbelly of a neoliberal society. So, perhaps, the movie's stale of inequity and a dark, murderous conspiracy doesn't feel far-fetched at all.

The galvanizing event in *From Hell* is the illicit sexual activity of a member of the white ruling elite and patriarchy, Prince Albert, who has fathered a child with a prostitute and contracted syphilis. If this information were to be exposed to the public, it would threaten the empire. Accordingly, a cabal of Freemasons take it upon themselves to defend the empire, and Albert's secret. They call on a physician who is slipping into dementia to be their agent. Dr. Gull. Gull undertakes the ripper crimes (indeed, Jack the Ripper), murdering all the prostitutes who know the prince's secret, thus protecting it forever. And the woman who bears Albert's child is stolen away and lobotomized, once more so her secret can be protected. Because the women are sex workers, and part of an underclass, it is easy to blame the Ripper's crime on their vocation as prostitutes. The Ripper only kills easy, promiscuous women, which the proper English society despises anyway. The society's sexual mores are thus the cloak of cover used by the Ripper to silence enemies of the Empire. Even as he slips into madness, Gull is praised that "*in all ways*," he "*attends to the health of our Empire*." Thus, the Ripper crimes are a political crime, not one, necessarily regarding sex, or madness. But the victims are all of one sex, and easily disregarded as merely "whores."

In other words, this society believes the prostitutes had it coming.

Rewardingly, *From Hell's* modus operandi is to reveal how a "sick" society is, in fact, culpable for the Ripper crimes, by attempting to protect its rich, entitled, and corrupt patriarchy. The nativist angle is viewed during the investigation too, as scapegoats are sought. "*What about the Jews?*" is brought up as a legitimate line of investigation of the murders, for example. Later, a character notes "*this country's overrun with foreigners.... Orientals, Jews, socialists, trying to overrun our monarchy*." Thus, given the textual evidence, Gull and his co-conspirators are simply attempting to make England great again, right?

In their view, they are restoring and protecting the western, Christian monarchy from all the godless others who are attempting to make the country their home. It's the same scapegoating that led to Hitler's Germany, and Trump's America, circa 2016–2020. The danger behind the throne is actually a conspiracy of rich white men out to protect their own, no matter what, no matter who must be killed, or who must be blamed for the Ripper crimes. Abberline is told at one point, actually, flat out "*find a scapegoat*." Accordingly, the men who control the levers of power in this society, such as the police (again: think systemic police corruption), can block investigations or lead them in the wrong direction.

Abberline is a fascinating protagonist for this tale, because he has checked out of the corrupt

society. He is a drug addict who lost his own wife while she was pregnant with his child. He has left the world willingly, because of his tragic past, but is still a good man. He is still a man who believes in facts and science, and that those things will lead him to solve a crime. Ultimately, he dies of an overdose when he realizes that facts and science have led him only to the conclusion that the Ripper is a puppet, the hand of a corrupt society and corrupt conspiracy.

Well-acted, gorgeously photographed, and edgily smart (though cynical) in its imaginings, *From Hell* creates a world of injustice and inequality and names it, simply, Hell. It is in an inescapable place, and the Ripper's return address is literally "*From Hell*." There are numerous reasons why this world is Hell, from the gritty poverty and hopeless life on the streets that the prostitutes endure, to the toxic definition of patriotism that suffuses the upper class of this society. One definition of patriotism is love of country, and the belief that it can always be better. Another definition of patriotism, as practiced by the illuminati in the film, is the love and preservation of the existing social order, which keeps in power those already in power, and disenfranchises the rest. *From Hell* was made in 2001, and yet this latter idea is one that percolates and carries deep resonance in America in the year 2020, as the country's populace clashes over what patriotism actually means, and who gets to claim its mantel.

In broad strokes, *From Hell* is another serial killer movie. But like other unique examples of the form in the 2000s (notably Ridley Scott's operatic *Hannibal* and the fantasy-oriented *The Cell*), it is not a film interested in rehashing yet another behavioral-based police procedural. Those trappings are here, of course, as they are in the other films name-checked above. But the focus has shifted. The Ripper is a sad, sick man, here, but the real monster is not the Ripper, but the society who created him, a shift in thinking about serial killer cinema that makes the film stand apart from the pack.

Fans of the Jack the Ripper story may not like the move away from seeking personal motivation for the killer, or uncovering his historical identity, but the film paints an ominous picture of an unjust society, and the conspiracies in plain sight that keep justice's arrival at bay.

Some horror fans confuse the brilliant *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) with this film, since it is also a period piece with Johnny Depp as a police inspector solving a horrific crime. The two films, despite their proximity in release, and the presence of the lead actor, could not be more different, however. *Sleepy Hollow* is a gorgeous re-creation of the Hammer Films aesthetic, whereas *From Hell* is a social commentary on power and its use in a corrupt society. Arriving second in theaters, *From Hell* has been dismissed by some, forgotten by others, but it provides a road map to our times that is horrifying, and impossible to forget.

Ginger Snaps (DTV) * * * *

Critical Reception

"What a pleasant surprise this was on its release, a werewolf movie with a unique voice. *An American Werewolf in London* and *The Howling* were already fading from memory as the last genuinely good werewolf films when this Canadian film appeared, with its teenage angst, its in your face puberty analogy, but for once, told from the perspective of young women. There was a fresh perspective, from the clever idea of dogs disappearing from the neighborhood as a sign of a lycanthrope (and not coyotes) on the prowl to the role menstruation plays in the narrative, this was a much more genuine film than *Teen Wolf* had ever tried to be. With two terrific leads (particularly Emily Perkins), this film taps into familial bonds between the sisters, almost as the beginnings of a pack forming, one that will abandon their mother and reject those outside their family, perhaps easing the transition into seeing other human beings as prey. This is still a fun film, though, even if it has thought-provoking ideas. It delivers as a horror film.

Of particular note is that once Ginger has slowly begun her transformation into a monster, into something dangerous, suddenly the boys take notice, her confidence is greatly increased, it is as if she has moved from prey to predator. This takes its toll on the relationship between the sisters, of course, but the true genius of this film was that even though Ginger is the titular character, it is really the tale of the younger sister Brigitte

struggling as her 'partner in crime' sibling has moved ahead of her into a new existence until Brigitte is forced to deal with the full-blown monster that Ginger becomes. A fascinating film on many fronts, and one of the best of the decade."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Emily Perkins (Brigitte); Katharine Isabelle (Ginger); Kris Lemche (Sam); Mimi Rogers (Pamela); Jesse Moss (Jason); Danielle Hampton (Trina); John Bourgeois (Henry); Peter Keleghan (Mr. Wayne); Christopher Redman (Ben); Jammy MacInnis (Tim); Lindsay Leese (Nurse Ferry); Wendii Fulford (Ms. Sykes); Anna Baggle (Mother).

CREW: Copperheart Entertainment, Water Pictures, Motion International, Lions Gate Films in association with Unapix Entertainment presents *Ginger Snaps*. Casting: Robin D. Cook, Robert McGee, Linda Phillips-Palo. Production Designer: Todd Cherniawsky. Costume Designer: Lea Carlson. Special Effects: Film Effects. Music: Michael Shields. Director of Photography: Thom Best. Film Editor: Brett Sullivan. Producer: Karen Lee Hall, Steve Hoban. Executive Producers: Dan Lyon, Alicia Reilly-Larson, Noah Segal. Story by: Karen Walton, John Fawcett. Written by: Karen Walton. Directed by: John Fawcett. M.P.A.A. Rating: NR. Running time: 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In suburban Bailey Downs, adolescent sisters Brigitte (Perkins) and Ginger (Isabelle) stage bloody photo shoots of traumatic accidents for a class assignment, even as dogs are being murdered in the community by some unseen, beastly assailant. Neither girl has yet begun to menstruate, but for Ginger that fact changes on the self-same night that she is attacked by the rampaging beast, a werewolf. Now Brigitte must contend with Ginger, who is rapidly transforming, and the pact of togetherness—"united against life as we know it"—that she shares with her sister.

COMMENTARY: "Can this happen to a normal woman?" a TV drama playing in the background of one early scene asks, in the dynamic *Ginger Snaps*. Perhaps that interrogative is the film's key question, or at least related to the film's key question.

What does it even mean to be a normal woman, in this day and age?

And more importantly, *who's asking the question?*

In exploring that notion of normality (or perhaps, societal norms), this delightful Canadian horror film, which came out of nowhere in the early 2000s to capture the hearts of horror movie fans and scholars alike, emerges as one of the best genre efforts of the decade. There are many films in the horror movie canon that focus on what it means to be a male adolescent (*Fright Night* [1985], *Teen Wolf* [1985], *Donnie Darko* [2001]), but relatively few that focus on the same story as it relates to young women. The 2000s gives the world both the *Ginger Snaps* franchise, and, in 2009, *Jennifer's Body*, to cover that territory.

Ginger Snaps succeeds through its clever writing, strong visualizations, and remarkable starring performances from young Emily Perkins and Katharine Isabelle. As the film opens and the credits roll, *Ginger Snaps* cheekily dramatizes the Fitzgerald sisters in what appear to be crime photographs, black-and-white, grainy scenes of them dead and dying in horrible ways. One such composition shows Ginger crushed under a garage door, another reveals Emily drowned in a bathtub, or curled up (nay, crunched up) at the bottom of a staircase. These scenes are gory, but also funny, because they come in answer to a high school class assignment prompt.

What does living in Bailey Downs mean to you?

For Brigitte and Ginger, obviously, it means nothing good.

These sisters would rather imagine how they might die (and thus vacate Bailey Downs), than face the prospect of living, endlessly, in this buttoned-down, suburban community of white picket fences. One such photograph even features one such fence, with Ginger impaled on its ivory spikes. According to authors Martin Barker, Ernest Mathjis and Xavier Menik, in their analysis *Menstrual Monsters: The*

Reception of *Ginger Snaps*: Cult Horror Franchise, this “montage of murder and mayhem not only demonstrates the pair’s disgust at the banality of their suburban surroundings, it also proclaims their self-styled exclusion from the heterosexually fueled dynamics of the teen scene.”⁶

The idea of Brigitte and Ginger finding a place of value for themselves, outside their community is reinforced not merely through their bizarre art, but in the film’s clever dialogue. For example, Ginger bemoans the fact that as a woman, she is limited to a certain set of narrow rules and roles in the society. “He’s a hero, and I’m just a lay,” the dialogue establishes, for example. At another point in the film, the dialogue establishes that a young woman can “only be a slut, a bitch,” or “the girl next door,” but not much else.

For Ginger and her sister, none of these roles fit.

Furthermore, the onset of menses—the so-called “curse,” might means, for Ginger, that boys will now be determined only to get in her pants. One powerful scene in the film expresses how being “on the rag,” the victim of “the curse” may feel repressive. Brigitte, standing in a grocery store aisle, faces hopelessly an imposing wall of feminine hygiene products. The rows of tampons and pads are filmed from a low angle, so that appear to be part of an unscalable barrier, while Brigitte herself is lensed from slightly above, a position showcasing her doom and entrapment.

She has met her fate, perhaps.

Such clever and meaningful moments, both in terms of narrative and visual symbolism suggest that to society at large, Brigitte and Ginger have their roles prescribed for them, and they are all related to how men view them, sexually.

If Brigitte and Ginger are promiscuous, they are sluts.

If they withhold sex from boys, they are bitches.

And if boys find them the right balance of sexy and chaste, they might luck out and be a girl next door and deemed acceptable.

Notice how all these roles are related to how boys see women; how males view a “normal” woman.

But Ginger, quite surprisingly, and because of the werewolf bite (which is timed with the arrival of her period), literally grows a spine, or a tailbone, and rejects the narrow view of her sex that patriarchal society has established for her and her sister. According to Erin M. Flaherty, in *Howling (and Bleeding) at the Moon: Menstruation, Monstrosity and the Double in The Ginger Snaps Werewolf Trilogy*:

By virtue of her abject female body, Ginger is already marginalized and constructed as Other in the suburban world in which she lives. As a result, Ginger embraces her lycanthropy and in doing so also embraces her identity as a woman. She becomes the goddamned “force of nature” of her teenage dreams.... Ginger’s monstrosity is her own reflection, an unwavering look at a fantastic self otherwise unattainable... (Digital Commons, May 8, 2008, Erin M. Flaherty).⁷

So Ginger faces the question raised at the start of this review and seen written onscreen. *Can this happen to a normal woman?*

(And if so, where should they sign up?).

But what does *normal* even mean?

Does “normal” mean that Ginger should consign herself to the limits that Bailey Downs imposes on women? Can a *normal* woman achieve independence and individuality through lycanthropy, or does that make her abnormal? And why are lycanthropy and menstruation linked in the film’s rhetoric?

Is “the curse” actually the door to freedom, not the doorway to servitude? Accordingly, *Ginger Snaps*—this “heady cocktail of high school pubescence and feminist folklore”—succeeds according to scholar April Miller in her essay *The Hair that Wasn’t There Before: Demystifying Monstrosity and Menstruation in Ginger Snaps and Ginger Snaps: Unleashed*, because it demystifies “both werewolf mythology and menstruation biology by constructing composite notions” of them “that allows for radical forms of female sexual consciousness.”⁸

In werewolf history, the monster has almost universally been male. The *Wolf Man*. *Ginger Snaps* trashes that long-held genre conceit and makes the monster—one tied irrevocably to a lunar cycle—female, women, a gender also tied to a monthly cycle. This approach is new, and different, and it infuses the film with a dizzying energy and power.

Ginger Snaps is a gory, low-budget film with some occasionally quite-dodgy special effects. And yet it crafts something almost unimaginable, a vital new way of gazing at one of the silver screen's most familiar boogeymen.

Er ... boogeywomen.

Hannibal * * * *

Critical Reception

"...the movie is too true to its source for its own good: It seems to take longer than a Sunday pot roast to get cooking, and when it does, all the flavour and aroma's been burned off. The script's whittling of Lecter's Florentine exploits to a series of Grand Guignol set pieces simply reinforces the impression of the chap as less a character than a serial-killing, name-above-the-title showstopper. (Needless to say, he'd slay 'em in Vegas.) Occasionally, the movie reminds us that Dr. Lecter was once a 'brilliant psychiatrist,' though you get no evidence of that in *Hannibal*, where he seems like a ghoulish variation on John Gielgud's snotty butler in *Arthur*. As an apparent victim of his own infamy then, perhaps Hannibal Lecter is quite properly reluctant to be dragged from the Florentine shadows into the blinding light of assembly-line blockbusterdom. But not because he's afraid of being caught. What he's worried about is being exposed. Not as a killer, but as a deadly bore."—Geoff Pevere, *The Record*, February 9, 2001, page B06.

"For anyone who's read the novel by Thomas Harris on which this film is based, please join me in frowning at Hollywood's lack of guts. Harris wrote his *Silence of the Lambs* sequel his way—this was not the sequel we wanted, but it was totally the sequel we deserved (we were fanboying a serial killer, folks!). The ending in the novel (which won't be spoiled here) was shocking, beautifully written, and had a majesty that horror fiction rarely even attempts.

And then we have this film. MOST of the novel is here. But the ending, watered down in all likelihood as part of the attempt to get Jodie Foster to return to the fold (which she did not), went the safe route, and it ruins the film. It's a pretty film even in its repulsiveness—Gary Oldman's Mason Verger puppet was amazingly well done. The Ray Liotta dinner scene is largely faithful to the novel. Harris portrayed Hannibal Lecter as a kind of combination of James Bond villain AND James Bond in the novel, rather than the evil Faustian character as presented in the two earlier novels, and Anthony Hopkins certainly plays the part with gusto—the problem in this film is not the acting. Julianne Moore does the best she can with not being Jodie Foster, even if she leaves no indelible stamp on the character. Ridley Scott does not attempt the almost documentary style that Jonathan Demme employed so well in *Silence of the Lambs*—and he handles the more Grand Guignol aspects of the film well (he did direct *Alien* after all, we shouldn't be surprised that he can effectively direct a gory scene around a dinner table!). The score is pretty but something of a letdown after Howard Shore's brilliant score for Demme's predecessor.

The ending is such a cop-out compared to the novel that I'm unable to forgive the film. It undermines the total intent of what Thomas Harris was trying to do with his novel. While it's always a pleasure to watch Hopkins in the role of his career, I wish this film had never been made. The television series *Hannibal* mines some of the content from the novel (although we never had a chance to meet Clarice Starling in this series)—I think the Hannibal Lecter universe has been much better served on television than on film, largely due to this disappointing Hollywood train wreck. At the end of the day it was probably greed—in the novel, Thomas Harris had pretty much put an end to the Hannibal Lecter story that could go on in future sequels. The film keeps the door open (and then they never really walked through it again, preferring prequels). Just a horrible shame. Read the book, if you haven't."—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound*.

"Only the final kill, slow and methodical, is memorable. A disappointment back in 2001 after waiting nine years for a follow-up to the Oscar-winning *Silence of the Lambs*, this sequel appears even more puny when matched against Bryan Fuller's masterful television series of the same name. Julianne Moore appears miscast and Anthony Hopkins captures none of the nuances that turned his 16-minute portrayal in *Silence* into an Oscar win."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Anthony Hopkins (Hannibal Lecter); Julianne Moore (Clarice Starling); Gary Oldman (Mason

Verger); Ray Liotta (Paul Krendler); Frankie R. Faison (Nurse Barney); Giancarlo Giannini (Insp. Rinaldo Pazzi); Francesca Neri (Allegra Pazzi); Zeljiko Ivanek (Dr. Cordell Doemling); Hazelle Goodman (Evela Drumgo); David Andrews (Pearsall); Francis Guinan (Noonan); James Opher (Eldridge); Enrico Lo Verso (Gnocco); Ivano Marescotti (Carlo); Favbrizio Gifuni (Matteo); Alex Corrado (Piero); Marco Greco (Tommaso).

CREW: MGM, Universal Pictures in association with Dino De Laurentiis Company, and Ridley Scott presents *Hannibal*. Casting: Louis Digiamo. Production Designer: Diego Loreggian, Norris Spencer. Costume Designer: Janty Yates. Special Effects: FBFX, Keith Vanderlaan's Captive Audience Productions, Mill Films, The Visual Effects Company. Music: Hans Zimmer. Director of Photography: John Mathieson. Film Editor: Pietro Scalia. Producers: Dino and Martha De Laurentiis, Ridley Scott. Executive Producer: Branko Lustic. Based on the novel by: Thomas Harris. Written by: David Mamet and Steven Zaillian. Directed by: Ridley Scott. M.P.A.A. Rating: 131 minutes. Running time: 131 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Hannibal “the Cannibal” Lecter (Hopkins) remains on the loose. He hides in Florence, Italy, masquerading as the scholar “Dr. Fell,” but soon falls under the watchful eyes of a corrupt police inspector, Pazzi (Giannini), who wishes to capture him and collect the reward money. Meanwhile, in the states, Clarice Starling (Moore) is made the scapegoat for a botched FBI/ATF raid against a drug dealer, and treated poorly by her ambitious superior, Paul Krendler (Liotta). Hannibal dispatches Pazzi in colorful and gruesome fashion and returns to the United States to reunite with Starling and help her, in his own homicidal way, deal with her career woes. He is unaware, however, that he is being hunted by a rich former victim, Mason Verger (Oldman), who has launched a scheme to feed Hannibal alive to his pigs.

COMMENTARY: It was a long, dry spell for fans of Hannibal Lecter, between *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and Ridley Scott's *Hannibal* (2001). And during that time of slumber in which Hannibal Lecter, the popular new, serial-killer “boogeyman” remained quiescent, much changed in American pop culture, and in the horror genre. Specifically, the popularity of serial killers in the media, both on the big screen, and on TV, knew no bounds, at least for a while. TV series such as *The X-Files*, *Millennium*, *Profiler*, *Criminal Minds*, etc., explored ever-creepier serial killers every week, as well as their antagonists in law enforcement. And films such as *Copycat* (1995) and *Se7en* (1995) took the format into ever bleaker, but also more affecting territory. When filmmakers planned the return of Hannibal the Cannibal after a decade of such entertainment, however, that decade's work had to be considered. It had to be weighed. The police procedural form, the serial killers, the ubiquitous cityscapes and rainfall all had to be re-evaluated, or the emulator of the form (*Hannibal*) would appear only an imitator of it. What was once new and scintillating was now only commonplace, and, actually, clichéd, and that fact had to be considered. Author Thomas Harris took a long time to write the sequel novel, *Hannibal*, it is true, but he also provided filmmaker Ridley Scott a map by which to take the character in a new and different direction at just the time audiences were getting bored with the cat and mouse dance between nefarious serial killers and dedicated detectives.



His bark is worse than his bite. Hannibal “The Cannibal” Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) returns to the big screen to menace Clarice Starling (Julianne Moore) in Ridley Scott’s operatic *Hannibal* (2001).

Specifically, Scott's film *Hannibal* is a grand, heightened melodrama. More than that, it is an opera itself. How would the uninitiated describe the format of the opera to a horror fan? Perhaps in the very words of Operavision, a service that streams live opera across the world:

"All human passions are represented in opera. Love, Tragedy and Death are often at the heart of the plot. The characters, sometimes torn between their feelings and their duty, are confronted with extraordinary situations and are carried away by their heightened feelings: Love at first sight, sacrifice, enchantment, courage, suicide or murder: all extremes can happen. Some characters are punished for their crimes, others find redemption or are stricken with remorse ... and sometimes there is a happy ending."

Again, it would have been easy to forge another police procedural about hunting a notorious serial killer. An author could have written such a story for *Hannibal* while hardly lifting a finger, and Scott, auteur of *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982) could have directed it in his sleep. And as late as the early 2000s, Hollywood was still churning out such retreads (see, or don't, *The Watcher*, or *Red Dragon*). This would have been the easy path; the predictable path. Yet instead of taking that predictable route, which also would have likely pleased no one, *Hannibal*'s filmmakers followed the details of the book, but also took the main character, Lecter, to the most elevated, emotional realm possible—the grand guignol opera. The result is a film far different from *The Silence of the Lambs*, but also one that exists on a far grander scale.

In *Hannibal*, spectacle replaces dramatic purity, heightened reality replaces the naturalistic, gritty reality of *Silence*, and it is the emotions, not the specifics of serial killer murders or the beats of "realistic" police procedures, which dictate the film's shape, pace, and flow. Indeed, the emotions of the characters dictate and color the narrative. The film's early portions, for instance, are played in the notes or colors of "betrayal," as Clarice (Moore) is betrayed by the FBI, and faces disgrace, and the avaricious Pazzi plots the capture of Lecter, an apparent "friend" (or at least acquaintance) for mere money. The second movement is an aria about revenge, and that vengeance is carried out against Pazzi, and Clarice's primary betrayer, career climbing Krendler.

And then, in some weird way, the final act of *Hannibal* is a song of love. It is about Lecter's love of Clarice, for her innocence, her honesty, and her courage. *Hannibal* risks capture, imprisonment and even death to take the revenge that Clarice's sense of duty won't permit. He takes that vengeance against the establishment that "envies" Starling's purity, and in doing so becomes, in the final analysis, the beast to Clarice's beauty. He is the monster, replete with his famous mask, who is willing to give all for the woman that he loves and admires. The novel went far further, of course, in the Lecter/Clarice relationship, but the movie goes far enough to satisfy the demands of opera. It charts two "pure" souls in the world who are harmed by others, come back from that harm, and—at least momentarily—"share" a connection. Going back to the definition of opera above, *Hannibal* lives in the same rarefied terrain of love, death, tragedy, and maybe, from a certain perspective, even, that happy ending.

Reading the above paragraph, one may quibble with this author's description. *Hannibal* Lecter is a pure soul? The answer, of course, is affirmative, from a certain point of view. *Hannibal* may not live by a code of ethics that most people would recognize, but he nonetheless possesses one. When his own personal freedom is not at risk, for example, *Hannibal* picks his victims very carefully; and for good reason. They have all broken some moral code, and therefore deserve punishment. Society, however, has been unable to provide that punishment. The guilty, the criminals, have escaped from culpability, scot-free. In *Hannibal*, Krendler manufactures false evidence against Starling and makes it appear to her superiors as though she is having an illicit, romantic relationship with Lecter. Lecter strikes back at the man for his moral trespasses. Specifically, *Hannibal* cooks Paul's brain and feeds it to him, though not before reminding him, "*I hate rude people.*"

Lecter's judgment of Mason Verger, a convicted child molester, is, from a similar point of view, also moral. Lecter realizes that the man is a monster, and then sees to it that the man cuts off his own face. "*Try peeling off your face and feeding it to the dogs,*" he suggests, while Verger is high on drugs. Then, he hands Verger a shard of broken glass to do it.

In both cases, the punishment fits the crime. Krendler's crime was one of the brain or of the mind,

framing Clarice and orchestrating a conspiracy of lies. His punishment was to lose his brain ... to gorge himself on it. In *The Inferno*—the subject of the opera that Hannibal and Pazzi attend in the film—in the second lowest circle of Hell, there were two men depicted there: Ugolino and Ruggiero. Ugolino was seen eating the skull of his betrayer, Ruggiero, and this ring of Hell was explicitly reserved for those guilty of *treachery* (against country, family, benefactors, etc.). Hannibal—an expert in Dante—no doubt saw Paul's betrayal of Clarice (his "kin" in the F.B.I.) as the sin for which he was to be punished. He picked a literary punishment that fit the specifics of the transgression.

Likewise, Verger fancied himself an alluring individual, one who could seduce his inappropriate prey through sheer charm and appearance. Hannibal thus induced Verger to physically deform himself so no being could gaze upon his visage without horror and repugnance. Pazzi fits the same pattern. He dies according to the traditional, historical method of those who have been avaricious: *hanging*. Before he kills Pazzi, Hannibal informs the detective that avarice and hanging were linked in Medieval times. He then proceeds to hang poor Pazzi in the tradition of the detective's ill-fated ancestor. Hannibal then throws in a little disembowelment for good measure.

Over and over, *Hannibal* reaches for operatic terrain by using literary, religious and musical metaphors. Hannibal is seen in a Christ pose, once captured by Verger, a follow-up to a betrayal by his own Judas, Pazzi. The Blue Danube, a waltz is employed for a scene, even. These are not compositions or comparisons one could easily imagine in a naturalistic serial killer movie such as *The Silence of the Lambs*. *Hannibal* is not only named for Lecter, it crafted in a style that fits his refined artistic taste: an opera with many literary, religious and musical allusions.

The film is his opera.

Hannibal continues the story of *The Silence of the Lambs*, but in a completely different way, so as to avoid comparisons, and to avoid repetition. It is clear that not every viewer was prepared to grapple with a film that departed so much in terms of tone from its popular predecessor. Hannibal is also widely disliked because Julianne Moore replaces Jodie Foster as Clarice Starling, and it's not a one for one change. Moore isn't bad. She is always a great actor, in fact. However, the one thing she can't do is spin Clarice in such a new or fresh way that the memory of Foster is erased. As Starling, Moore is smart and gorgeous, and vulnerable and strong in equal measures. And yet that still doesn't seem enough to bring the character alive in a way that rivals Foster's portrayal. Which may mean, frankly, that doing so is an impossible task. Or at least was an impossible task in 2001. That established, there are some moments in *Hannibal* when one can feel the power of the "Men Behaving Badly" films of the era. Here, Clarice finds herself enmeshed in the male club of law enforcement and treated as the perennial outsider. "*They hate you and they envy you*," Lecter tells her, and that is no doubt because Starling is pure, not corruptible. Though they serve the law, men like Krendler actually serve only their ambitions.

What is the best way to enjoy and appreciate *Hannibal*, or to reinterpret it if you were disappointed with it as a sequel to *The Silence of the Lambs*? Well, it is a fair and (largely) faithful adaptation of the Harris novel, for starters. But more importantly, Scott's work of art should be understood not as the kitchen-sink procedural type film that spawned it, but as a bigger, more colorful opera that is highly stylized, and takes Hannibal Lecter to a world of poetry, music, dance, tragedy, and love. It is still a grueling, sickening horror movie (again, witness the maiming of Verger, the disembowelment of Pazzi, and the infamous brain eating scene), but this is the Opera of Hannibal Lecter, and Scott blows up the by-now tired serial killer cinema by moving in this fresh, outrageous, and utterly unconventional direction. The film should be championed for its daring, its beauty, and its artistry, not the fact that it doesn't ape the great film that preceded it.

Here's a thought experiment.

Imagine *Hannibal* were another police-procedural serial killer format, coming after all the others. After *Copycat*. After *Se7en*. After *Jennifer 8*. After *The Watcher*. Would it have been reviewed any better? Or it would have been criticized as a rehash of a great film?

Hannibal may be considered a disappointment or strange, but no one can ever accuse it of being a tired repetition of *The Silence of the Lambs*. This film sings out to be judged on its own merits, and in the category of serial killer *magnum opus*.

Jeepers Creepers * * *

Critical Reception

“...writer-director Victor Salva (Powder) at least takes an awkward stab at earnestness as he attempts to transport us back to the wholesome days of drive-in disembowelments. And though Salva remembered the rubber monster mask and fake blood, he forgot to bring along the sense of innocent mischief that made those Grade Z movies so enjoyable.”—Dusty Smith, *The Dayton Daily News*: “Classic Genre Hacked up in Horrifying Creeper.” August 2001, page 10.

“Sigh. The first half of this film was the best horror film in a generation. It captured the dread of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—it had the likeable characters of *Halloween*—it had some seriously good set design—it was generally scary. It was like *Duel* but with a look inside the truck, and everything seemed to be going wonderfully. The two leads were very well cast and were really making the film work well.

Then, we introduce a character whose sole purpose is to provide exposition, a psychic. If there’s a more ham-handed delivery of information in a modern film than this one, I’m not aware of it. All of the good will that had been built up to this point is drained away in a matter of minutes, and the film turns into 1972’s *Gargoyles* (which is not a bad film by any means) but wasn’t where this film should have gone.

This film is breathtaking in its ability to deliver such high highs and then such low lows. Francis Ford Coppola was involved with this film. Seriously. I intend to revisit this film someday and watch up until the point where the psychic arrives, and pretend the film ended there (and the sequels never happened). I wish that’s how it had worked out in real life. I’m sure someone behind the scenes realized they had a franchise here and were laying the foundations for that (although having to wait decades for The Creeper to return, given his peculiar lifecycle, was an odd choice for franchise builders).

It seems very unfair to criticize a film for what it was, rather than what it wasn’t. Wait a minute—that’s actually totally fair. This film was a home run that faced a stiff wind that blew it back into the infield and the infield fly rule applied—it’s an automatic out. Next batter. This should have been a classic, it felt like it was going to be one, and then poof. NEVER use a psychic ... just don’t.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

“It’s difficult to separate the film from the director, convicted child molester Victor Salva, when the camera lingers on Justin Long’s juvenile-appearing, half-naked body (though it’s even more apparent in the high school football team-filled sequel). That said, Salva is a savvy horror director who masterly builds suspense, particularly in the scene where Long follows what appears to be a body down a path that *Alice in Wonderland* would not have slid down. Long and Gina Philips have outstanding sibling-like chemistry and allow the audience to invest in this gory tale.”—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Gina Philips (Trish); Justin Long (Darry); Jonathan Breck (The Creeper); Patricia Belcher (Jezelle); Brandon Smith (Sgt. Tubbs); Eileen Brennan (Cat Lady); Peggy Sheffield (Waitress); Jeffrey William Evans (Manager); Patrick Cherry (Binky); Jon Beshara and Avis-Marie Barnes (Troopers); Steve Raulerson (Cellblock Officer); Tom Tarantini (Roach); William Hazenzahl (Officer with Hole in Chest).

CREW: United Artists Films, American Zoetrope in association with Cinterenta-Cinebeta, presents *Jeepers Creepers*. Casting: Kimberly and Mark Mullen Production Designer: Kevin Egeland. Costume Designer: Emae Villalobos. Special Effects: Make-up & Monster Studios, E=mc² Digital. Music: Bennett Salvay. Director of Photography: Don E. FauntLeRoy. Film Editor: Ed Marx. Producers: Tom Luse, Barry Oppen. Executive Producers: Will Bar, Francis Ford Coppola, Eberhard Kayser, Mario Ohoven, Linda Reisman. Written and Directed by: Victor Salva. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On a lonely back road, bickering siblings Trish (Phillips) and Darry (Long) drive home from college. En route, they encounter what at first appears to be a rude driver in an unusual old truck.

Soon, however, Trish and Darry realize the driver is much more than aggressive. He is actually a serial killer, and they witness him dumping a body in a sheet, perhaps a living one, down a hole next to an old church. When the criminal leaves the premises, Trish and Darry circle back to the church and attempt to rescue the discarded person. Below the church, Darry discovers a cathedral of horrors, where many victims and their body parts are plastered to the walls and ceilings. It becomes apparent that their nemesis is not a run-of-the-mill serial killer, after all, but a hungry demon who gets to walk the Earth for twenty-three days, every twenty-three years, so he can ... feed. Soon, the monster takes an unhealthy interest in Darry and Trish and begins to pursue them on the road. They attempt to get help from the local police, but even armed officers can't stop the determined demon from seeking out its quarry.



Where did he get those eyes? The Creeper (Jonathan Breck) bares his fangs in *Jeepers Creepers* (2001), one of the last horror films released before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

COMMENTARY: *Jeepers Creepers* is a terrifying “road trip gone wrong”-styled film that proved a surprise hit at the American box office over the Labor Day weekend in 2001, shortly before the September 11 terrorist attacks. The film is clever and taut and features likable characters and good performances. It also introduces one of the great original monsters of the decade, the demonic and seemingly unstoppable Creeper. A feeling of relentless inevitability contributes to the film’s suspense, as Darry and Trish are left guessing, until the last moment, which of the siblings the invincible monster has honed-in on and is hunting.

The elephant in the room regarding *Jeepers Creepers* is no doubt its director, Victor Salva. He is a convicted sex offender who served his sentence in a state prison following his 1988 arrest for sexual misconduct with minors and possession of child pornography. There are some people who refuse to watch the director’s films, even today, because of the terrible crimes he committed over thirty years ago. His victims have spoken out, courageously, over the years about what occurred and described how they feel that Hollywood coddled the pedophile.

On the other side of the equation, there are those who admire the *Jeepers Creepers* movies as solid horror efforts, and feel that having served his prison sentence, the director has adequately paid his debt to society for his misdeeds.

Why is any of this relevant to an examination of *Jeepers Creepers*? If one is so inclined, it is possible (though perhaps not pleasant) to interpret the entire film as a statement of sorts on Salva’s crime, and his history as a pedophile. The Creeper is an avatar of unhealthy appetites, a rampaging “hungry” thing that can’t easily be stopped and can never be sated. And the Creeper steals important things, necessary things, from his victims, mainly body parts, which then become a part of him forever. For example, the monster in the film comes for Darry, and cuts out his eyes. Those eyes replace his own orbs. This monstrous behavior seems very much like a metaphor for Salva’s criminal past if one considers that his actions too have stolen something important from his victims (namely innocence), and that victim and victimizer are connected by his actions. It would not be wise, perhaps, to read deeper into the film’s subtext beyond the facts of what the creature does, and the facts of what Salva did. One would not want to state that the film is an apology, or a rationalization, or even an explanation or a “reason” for what he did. Rather, however, it seems appropriate to state on a basic level that *Jeepers Creepers* knowingly concerns predation and the avaricious nature of predation.

As the window to the souls, Darry’s stolen eyes substitute, perhaps, for the happiness taken away by a pedophile’s deeds. If this idea is taken into account, the film is even more unsettling and disturbing. It is understandable that so many people are bothered by its existence, as the connection between the film’s auteur, and its monster is not difficult to discern.

On the contrary, it is hard to ignore.

Certainly, Salva knows his horror films, and that knowledge suffuses every frame of his 2001 picture. The early scenes on the road, with a battle between the Creeper’s truck and Trish and Darry in their sedan, knowingly possesses echoes of Spielberg’s *Duel* (1972). And the quarreling, deeply connected (and deeply pathological) brother and sister seem to knowingly reflect such famous horror movie siblings as Johnny and Barbara in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), or Franklin and Sally in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974).

In families, the sibling relationship is deeply fraught with psychological pitfalls. Siblings might be best friends, or worst enemies. Siblings may be imperfect mirrors for each other, having grown up in the same context, but having drawn different conclusions about that context based on gender, or birth order. Trish and Darry bicker throughout the film, and yet share an unshakeable bond. They can’t stand each other, and yet they love each other. They bicker constantly, and yet fight for each other too.

Jeepers Creepers also concerns, at least early on, an important moral question. Darry wants to go back and save the Creeper’s victim, who has been dumped in a pipe. Trish wants to get away. “*You know the part in scary movies when someone does something stupid, and everyone hates them for it? This is it,*” she says, in a knowing line of dialogue that places the film as a child of the self-referential *Scream* era that immediately preceded the altered horror genome of the War on Terror Age. But the moral question remains crucial. Darry wants to help others, but ultimately can’t save himself, and Trish wants to leave

without helping. She is left, at picture's end, unable to help her brother, and haunted, no doubt, by his abduction. Their moral debate over the right thing to do is reflected in the finale. Darry's goodness resulted in the Creeper catching his scent and killing him. Trish's refusal to do good is a guilty reminder for her, at film's end, that no one helps her recover Darius, just as she did not want to help the victim in the pipe.

Jeepers Creepers also alludes to *The Terminator* (1984) by featuring a full-on massacre and shoot-out at a police station. It plays in some of the same territory as *Don't Look Now* (1974), as well, by featuring a Cassandra-type psychic character, Jezelle, who knows what horror awaits Darry yet is helpless to prevent him from walking headlong to his doomed fate. Together, these homages or allusions make *Jeepers Creepers* feel like "old school horror" from the 1970s and 1980s, rather than a product of the new century. This quality, along with the rubber reality monster (which can sprout wings and regrow a severed head), make the film feel much like a faithful call-back to the genre as it once was. Salvatorre is also an accomplished director who understands how to craft horror scenes to elicit maximum impact. He possesses a muscular sense of camera movement too. The pans in the film are not just fast, but blindingly fast, and he knows how to craftily stage a reveal, like Darry's horrifying discovery of the Creeper's House of Pain.

Jeepers Creepers is smart, knowing and well-made. It as an effective horror film, but again, how much one permits themselves enjoy it depends largely on views of the director and his life. Is he a criminal who paid his debt to society and whose movies can be enjoyed, guilt-free? Or is he every bit the monster Creeper of the film's title?

That answer won't be settled here and must come down to individual conscience. But on its technical and horror merits alone, *Jeepers Creepers* is a well-made film.

John Carpenter's *Ghosts of Mars* * * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"Scorned by most critics and audiences in both America and Europe, Carpenter's *Ghosts of Mars* increasingly seems the most timely, if not prescient, Hollywood film of Summer 2001. The title alone should have clued viewers to the film's relevance, even before the 9-11-01 attacks on the U.S. Nonetheless, this didn't stop viewers in Europe, where the film opened and rapidly closed in October and November, from widely ignoring or dismissing it."—Tom Whalen, *Literature/Film Quarterly*: "This is about one thing—dominion": John Carpenter's *Ghosts of Mars*," 2002, pages 304–307.

"*Ghosts of Mars* is built around provocative themes—civilization vs. primitivism—but it develops them in the simplest, most straight-ahead style possible. Carpenter has made some classics of horror (*Halloween* and very underrated *In the Mouth of Madness*) and of science fiction (*Dark Star*, *Starman* and the equally underrated 1982 *The Thing*). But, though *Ghosts of Mars* is watchable and even exciting, it's not one of his best. The monsters aren't scary enough; the background is a little too drab and dark; and, except for the amiably lecherous turn by Statham, the characters don't stick in your mind. Interesting sexual tensions may develop among Ice Cube, Henstridge and Statham, but the portrayal of them doesn't run very deep. Ice Cube doesn't have enough menace; Henstridge lacks mystery."—Michael Wilmington, *Chicago Tribune*, "Ghosts takes the western genre to Mars." August 24, 2001, page 7A.

"Everybody hates this film and I don't know why. Sure, it's not Carpenter's best film, it probably wouldn't make the top half of the list of his films—actually, it probably wouldn't make the top half of the bottom half of his filmography. Elements of *Ghosts of Mars* (I'm thinking the train elements) have been reused in *Snowpiercer* and *Train to Busan*, just to name a few (although, to be fair, *Horror Express* played with some of these concepts long before Carpenter did). Even *Terror Train* did. This film is a mashup of a Quatermass film, your typical Carpenter siege movie (*Assault on Precinct 13*, *Prince of Darkness*), a little of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, but most importantly, this is as much a western as any of Carpenter's films, and many of those are westerns in their DNA.

Give me a bad Carpenter film over many other films any day. Carpenter was trying very much to evolve as a

film-maker in his later works—the slow burn of a film like *Halloween* wasn't working in the new millennium, and going back as far *Escape from L.A.* you could see that Carpenter was editing his films more tightly, trying to move at the pace of more attention-span-challenged viewers, and this film shows that in spades—it's sleek, tight, and fun. It's got some great 1950s B-movie throwback concepts (well, I wouldn't call *Forbidden Planet* a B-movie, and some of that's in play here as well).

Part of me always wonders if this film suffered from its score (which I actually like). It's the most heavy metal of any score to a Carpenter film, loud and frenetic, all of it trying to add to a high energy experience. I don't think people think of Carpenter as a high energy film maker, and maybe he's not. But this film basically ended his career (*The Ward*, made years later, was much more in Carpenter's wheelhouse, but was fairly bland).

Carpenter deserved better. This film, like *Vampires* before it, showed Carpenter trying to figure out how to stay relevant in a very changing landscape, and he made some fun films in that process—this is one of them. It's not earth-shattering, but it so doesn't deserve the hate it gets.”—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Natasha Henstridge (Lt. Melanie Ballard); Ice Cube (Desolation Williams); Jason Statham (Sgt. Jericho Butler); Clea DuVall (Bashira Kincaid); Pam Grier (Commander Helena Braddock); Joanna Cassidy (Whitlock); Richard Cetrone (Big Daddy Mars); Rosemary Forsyth (Inquisitor); Liam White (Michael Descanso); Duane Davis (Uno); Lobo Sebastian (Dos); Rodney A. Grant (Tres); Peter Jason (McSimms); Wanda de Jesus (Akoshay); Doug McGrath (Benchley); Rick Edelstein (Zimmerman); Robert Carradine (Rodale); Matt Nolan (Minor); Charlotte Cornwell (Voiceover Narrator).

CREW: Sony Pictures Entertainment, Screen Gems, Storm King Productions and Animationwerks presents *John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars*. Casting: Reuben Cannon. Production Designer: William Elliott. Costume Designer: Robin Michel Bush. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, The Chandler Group, Hunter/Gratzner Industries, ShadowCaster, Amalgamated Pixels, Riot, New Deal Studios. Music: John Carpenter, Anthrax. Director of Photography: Gary B. Kibbe. Film Editor: Paul C. Warschilka. Producer: Sandy King. Written by: Larry Sulkis and John Carpenter. Directed by: John Carpenter. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the year 2176 AD, on the partially-terra-formed frontier planet Mars, a train—an ore freighter, number 74 *Yankee Trans-Mariner*—barrels through the harsh Martian wasteland into the capitol city of Chryse. Aboard her is a hand-cuffed Lt. Melanie Ballard (Henstridge), a veteran police officer addicted to a street narcotic called “Clear.” In her after action report to a quorum of the planet's ruling body, the Matronage, Ballard reports on the disposition of her missing team. Under the command of Helena Braddock (Grier), Ballard's squad—including rookie Bashira (DuVall), and boastful male “breeder” Jericho (Statham)—set out several days earlier for a frontier town called Shining Canyon in the Southern Sector. The team's assignment was to take into custody the notorious criminal, Desolation Williams (Ice Cube). However, upon arrival in the mining town, the police found virtually all the civilians there sadistically murdered. Williams—the obvious suspect—was locked safely in a cell the whole time. Another survivor in town was a scientist named Whitlock (Cassidy). She had arrived in Shining Canyon following a disaster in another part of the valley. While mining an unexplored mountain, she and several workers discovered a “tomb” locked away deep in a Martian mountainside. By coming into physical contact with the door/seal of the ancient tomb, Whitlock activated some kind of malevolent “hurricane,” actually the “ghosts” or spirits of long dead, warrior Martians. These mysterious Martian spirits could be carried on the wind and were capable of possessing one human being after another. The ghosts' purpose was simple: “vengeance on anything or anything that tries to lay claim” to Mars. Ballard reports about how Desolation and his criminal associates (Uno, Dos and Tres) joined forces with the surviving police officers to escape from town, which quickly became overrun with homicidal Martian Warriors in human bodies. Melanie realized this war was about “dominion” and so decided with the others to reverse trajectory and attempt to destroy the Martians by blowing up the town's nuclear reactor.

COMMENTARY: In the first decade of the 21st century, Hollywood obsessively remade horror maestro John Carpenter's films at a blazing rate. In fact, much of the auteur's early career was re-tooled and re-imagined, with remakes of *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), *Halloween* (1978), *The Fog* (1980) and even *Halloween 2* (1981). Despite the fact that an unprecedented percentage of Carpenter's big-screen career has already been exhumed and re-purposed for modern silver-screen consumption, his reputation with modern critics is—to phrase it politely—not so good. In August of 2001, his last theatrical release, *John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars*, was met with almost universal critical scorn, and a casual sense of dismissal. But very few, if any, of *Ghosts of Mars*' myriad detractors seriously considered the artistic choices underlining the film's storytelling approach, particularly Carpenter's Godard-esque fracturing of time with the device of the flashback. Instead, reviewers categorized the film as “shoddy,” “lazy” and even one created on “auto-pilot.” Although Roger Ebert and Richard Roeper awarded *John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars* two thumbs-up, they were among the few critics who recognized this intriguing film for what it was instead of reflexively disdaining it for what it simply was not.



This is about dominion. The cast of *John Carpenter's Ghost of Mars* (2001) takes on an insurrection. Top: Desolation Williams (Ice Cube) and Jericho (Jason Statham) are bracketed by Whitlock (Joanna Cassidy) and Bashira (Clea Duvall). Bottom: Lt. Melanie Ballard (Natasha Henstridge) in a rare moment of quiet.

What is it about *John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars* that irritated so many critics so deeply? And why were contemporary audiences so grievously out of step with Carpenter's 2001 horror-thriller? In discovering the answers to those questions, one must gaze at Carpenter's film career as a whole, as well as the cinematic influences underlining *Ghosts of Mars*. One important way to judge the caliber of an artist and his or her body of work is to study how the artist brings a personal set of interests and aesthetics from one cinematic project to the next. Study all those projects together, and one should then be able to ascertain the points of a career ethos, an umbrella of consistency that helps one better to understand individual productions and the artist's choices. In Carpenter's case, one might point to his visual legerdemain: that trademark, slow-moving and elegant camera work, which forges a kind of "trance" state that leaves audiences susceptible to foreground jolts and soundtrack stingers. Alternately, one could point to his self-styled, martial sounding, hard-driving musical cues on the soundtrack. And in terms of theme, Carpenter's narratives often feature a heightened sense of bonding or camaraderie among ethnically diverse characters, not to mention a distinct distaste or unease for authority, the status quo, or The Establishment.

These brush strokes help students view Carpenter as a consistent artist with a wide variety of films stretching over four decades. In his case, critics also have one other possible guidepost: Carpenter's deep admiration for the Western genre. Specifically, Carpenter's much-acknowledged favorite film is 1959's *Rio Bravo*, a Western starring John Wayne. Over Carpenter's long career, that Hawks film has served as the specific template or blueprint for no less than three Carpenter films: *Assault on Precinct 13*, *Prince of Darkness* (1987), and, here, *Ghosts of Mars*.



Kicking ass is what they do best. Lt. Ballard (Natasha Henstridge) and Desolation Williams (Ice Cube) strike up a surprising alliance in *John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars* (2001).

Written by Jules Furthman and Leigh Brackett, *Rio Bravo* is an early siege-style film in which a group of heroic characters must work together to repel the equivalent of a hostile invading force. In *Rio Bravo*, audiences meet the unlikely “heroic” triumvirate of a “sheriff, a barfly, and a cripple.” In order, they are: Sheriff John T. Chance (John Wayne), Dude (Dean Martin)—*an alcoholic*—and an old man, named Stumpy (Walter Brennan). The face of evil is represented by wealthy Nathan Burdette, whose brother Joe is being incarcerated by the honorable Chance inside the local jail. Burdette proceeds to close down the town so that Chance and his men can’t leave, and—importantly—so that no additional law enforcement can get in. Then Burdette sends in hired killers to “prod” Chance into releasing his brother from behind bars. Our three heroes (at least two of them quite untraditional...) work together to combat this siege and defeat Burdette. In the process, they come to understand, admire and depend on one another. Their bond is unbreakable.

Carpenter recreated the central premise of *Rio Bravo* in *Assault on Precinct 13*. In that film, it was Lt. Bishop (Austin Stoker) assuming the John Wayne role of honorable law enforcement official. He was assisted not by a drunk, however, but by a notorious criminal named Napoleon Wilson (Darwin Joston), and a Hawksian woman, a police secretary named Leigh (Laurie Zimmer). In this case, they were protecting an imperiled citizen from an extremely violent gang, Street Thunder.

Going into specifics, one can pinpoint how cleverly Carpenter updated the *Rio Bravo* template from the Old West to the urban, inner city blight of the 1970s exploitation era. The so-called “cut-throat song” of Hawks’ film is transformed into the gang banner or *cholo* in *Assault on Precinct 13*. The wagon filled with dynamite that initiates Burdette’s ultimate defeat in *Rio Bravo* becomes a cast-off acetylene canister in the Carpenter’s film. *Assault on Precinct 13* even repeats the trademark action moment in *Rio Bravo* in which Colorado (Ricky Nelson) throws Chance his shotgun as hit men close in for the kill, but only here the quick action is shared by Bishop and Wilson in the under-siege police station.

In *Ghosts of Mars*, Carpenter creates another heroic troika of equally unlikely origins, and—once again—changes the setting. The Old West/Inner City location becomes instead a frontier town on Mars (also replete with a jail building). The heroic Ballard, like Dude before her, must overcome a personal vice (drug addiction, rather than alcoholism), and Desolation Williams is but a future variation of noble crook, Napoleon Wilson (one can even detect the similarity in names there.... Williams/Wilson). Howard Hawks unofficially re-made *Rio Bravo* as *El Dorado* in 1967 and as *Rio Lobo* in 1970 and he is championed as an auteur for his sense of consistency. Now, Carpenter has also vetted the same Western archetype three times, but modern audiences are so distant from the original *Rio Bravo* (or original *Assault on Precinct 13*, for that matter), that his method, his “homage” is not recognized, let alone championed for the clever alterations and updates he has injected into the longstanding formula.

Rio Bravo and *Assault on Precinct 13* aren’t the only important antecedents to 2001’s *Ghosts of Mars*. The film also serves as a futuristic version of the 1964 British classic *Zulu*, which was also a “transplanted” version of the American Western genre (and particularly the sub-genre of *the siege*.) *Zulu* recounted the true story of a landmark 1879 battle at “Rorke’s Drift” in Africa. Miraculously, 150 British soldiers held out and survived a siege by 4,000 Zulu warriors at a small supply depot and hospital. The Zulu attackers in the film were deliberately modeled after the Western genre’s stereotype of Indians as frightening, aggressive savages, ones with vastly different rules of warfare than those of the “civilized” West. *Zulu*’s director, Cy Endfield even had his Zulu extras watch Western films to get down the behavior of Indian marauders in preparation for their attack scenes.

The Martian warriors of Carpenter’s *Ghosts of Mars* perform the same function, and—like their Zulu or Indian predecessors in film history—are visually differentiated from the forces of the establishment/civilization. The Martians are the savage “uncivilized” attackers, and with their strange body piercings, sharpened teeth and battle paints represent an “alien” or unfamiliar aesthetic. More than that, the Martian ghosts represent the indigenous population resisting an Imperialist occupation. Following *Ghosts of Mars*’ release, Peter Jackson’s *The Two Towers* (2002) utilized some of the impressive compositions and ideas of *Zulu* (as well as the seemingly impossible battle/siege scenario) as the foundation for the Helm’s Deep sequence in that fantasy. Fans of *Zulu* may find other corollaries between that film’s presentation of scoundrel Henry Hook and *Ghosts of Mars*’ thief, Desolation

Williams. Both are rebellious characters or anti-heroes who fight successfully against the Establishment and the enemy. Also, *Zulu* opens with the narration of a communiqué detailing the shocking defeat of a British Outpost in Africa (at Isandlwana) by the Zulu forces. Melanie Ballard in *Ghosts of Mars* fulfills the same function in Carpenter's 2001 narrative; her voice-over narration representing the "early" warning of a coming storm on Mars.

In much more general terms, Carpenter has also crafted *Ghosts of Mars* as a clever homage to the Western format. His film features a primitive frontier town (not the Tech-Noir metropolis of *Blade Runner*, for example), and his futuristic society employs trains and balloons as conveyances, rather than spaceships or hovercrafts. He arms his police with rifles and pistols, rather than lasers or light sabers. Basically, Carpenter has "terra-formed" the conventions of one genre to make them fit another, transforming his Martian movie into a pitched battle between futuristic cowboys and extra-terrestrial Indians.

Finally, in addition to his well-documented love of Westerns (and even transplanted Westerns like *Zulu*), Carpenter has long been a genre fan, with a particular affection for the British Quatermass film of the 1950s and 1960s (*The Creeping Unknown*, *Enemy from Space* and *Five Million Years to Earth*). In particular, *Five Million Years to Earth* (1968) dealt with the concept of a Martian psychic force sweeping through London after a buried rocket was excavated by workers toiling on a new underground subway line. These Martians had changed our human evolution, were responsible for aspects of human mythology, and also exerted a strange, malevolent mental power. Of course, that last bit represents the set-up and nature of the Martian Enemy in *Ghosts of Mars* too. They are incorporeal spirits of deadly and evil desires, and ones fully capable of possessing the living.

So, what critics can see in *Ghosts of Mars* is two-fold: it's a deliberate tribute to the admired films of Carpenter's youth (most importantly *Rio Bravo*, *Zulu* and *Five Million Years to Earth*), and a consistent continuation of Carpenter's obsession with Westerns, and with transplanting Western conventions to new genres and new locations.

One frequent point of contention about *Ghosts of Mars* involves the film's stylized dialogue, which has been described by some critics as hackneyed, or corny, or even cheesy. But once again, it appears that context is necessary for an understanding of the film's *modus operandi*. The characters in *Ghosts of Mars* do indeed boast a special brand of verbal sparring and linguistics, and it is explicitly the macho, virtually "mock-tough" dialogue of Howard Hawks *Rio Bravo*. In our gritty age of movie naturalism, this approach seems artificial and theatrical to many viewers unfamiliar with it. To people who grew up with Westerns in the 1950s, it just seems natural. Melanie Ballard isn't a slasher movie's "Final Girl" as such, but rather, perhaps, the ultimate evolution of the so-called Hawksian Woman, a character who "*trusts completely her own spontaneous impulses of attraction and repulsion*," (as witnessed in her passionate, unexpected kiss with Jericho and her earlier turn-down of Braddock.) Ballard also boasts a "*sense of identity beyond her alliances (with high society) and she is committed only to those personal ties she wishes to acknowledge*."¹⁰

Ballard's is nobody's unquestioning fool: she just doesn't take orders; she doesn't obediently side with higher-ups. Instead, she boasts her own code, and she's not a joiner unless she chooses to be one. As she states to the avaricious Helena, she's as "*straight as they come*," a line laced with double meaning. She's a rebel (a heterosexual in a predominantly homosexual society), and she's a law enforcement official for her own purposes, not the purposes of her higher ups. She keeps her personal reasons for being a cop close to the vest, a sign of the "personal ties" she apparently has no wish to share. Many of Carpenter's films feature the tough, macho-talk associated with Old Hollywood's male-bonding, Western epics. This manner of expression is especially notable in *Vampires*—but with updated 90s vulgarity—between Crow and Guiteau, and in *Assault on Precinct 13*, where Wilson is given to such grandiose comments as that he was "*born out of time!*" Here, the same theatrical, overdramatic style is extended to include—for the first time in Carpenter lore—a woman in essentially the John Wayne role. This style of wordplay also means that Ballard and Desolation share a tough-talking bond that borders on the flirtatious. "*I never give my word*," Desolation says. "*I never make deals with crooks*," Ballard shoots back.

In the film's last scene, Desolation notes with admiration that Ballard would make a great criminal, and Ballard responds in kind, saying he'd make a great cop. Then they look at each other and say "Nah!" Again, it's a kind of duet: two "opposites" circle one another with admiration, having learned to respect each other despite their obvious differences. It's the same dance step that Bishop and Wilson shared in *Assault on Precinct 13*, although in that case, the line crossed was not sex-based (male/female) but race-based (black/white). When confronted with certain death and total apocalypse, Ballard and Desolation intensify their dance, revealing aspects of their personal codes of conduct. Ballard wonders what makes Desolation tick. He answers that if she sticks around, he'll tell her someday. She wonders when that will be, and Desolation answers "*when the tide is high, and the water's rising...*"

To some folks, this sort of dialogue may seem clichéd, or even cheesy, but it's more accurately just old-fashioned, and a reflection of the kind of film *Ghosts of Mars* seeks to be, a deliberate evocation of the 1950s Hollywood Western. People seemed to like this approach to dialogue just fine in *Assault on Precinct 13* but deride it in *Ghosts of Mars*.

Note too that the characters in *Ghosts of Mars* are prone to long, extensive monologues about their backgrounds and histories; about the places they came from, and the lessons they learned. "*I don't give a damn about this planet*," says Desolation, "*It's been trying to kill me since the day I was born.*" This too is Western-speak. To complain about it or call it corny would be like decrying the Iambic Pentameter of Shakespeare as archaic or calling the gutter vocabulary of Quentin Tarantino films unnecessary.

When in a space western ... you talk as though you are in a space western.

John Carpenter has always been a maverick, one who uses his films to brazenly question authority and "the Establishment." In *They Live*, Carpenter revealed Republicans, Yuppies, and even film critics were secret alien invaders. In *Vampires*, he suggested that the Catholic Church was corrupt, and in league with devilish vampires. In *Escape from L.A.*, Carpenter had his hero, Snake Plissken, plunge the world into total darkness and primitivism because it needed a fresh start after the (lifetime) term of an evangelical Christian president. Even in *Halloween*, Carpenter didn't restore order, but let the Boogeyman remain on the loose.

Ghosts of Mars is possessed of a similarly anarchic, anti-authority bent. In the future envisioned by the film, patriarchy is entirely discredited. But Carpenter's argument in this case seems to be that the more things change, the more things actually stay the same. The Matronage is described in unflattering terms as being in thrall to Big Business (the unseen, mysterious Cartel). And sexual harassment is still a huge concern in 2176, though here it is played out between the arrogant ruling lesbians (like Pam Grier's character) who can advance the careers of "straights" (like Ballard, and Bashira) if only they submit to sexual demands. It's an Old Girls Club instead of an Old Boy's Club, but the abuse of power remains the same. Even with women in charge, authority is corrupt. Here, the women of the Matronage are so concerned with procedure and their reputations that they are unable to conceive of the grave Martian threat until it is much too late. They have become impotent, unimaginative and foolish, and they will soon be destroyed for their trespasses.

Men are clearly the underclass here. Jericho (Statham) is around, apparently only as a sex object. He's known as a "breeder" and consistently brags about his bedroom abilities throughout the film. In this world, a man has been reduced, essentially, to the size of his "dick." At one point, Desolation Williams even notes without a trace of irony or humor that he's been on the run from *The Woman* (not *The Man*) his whole life. So, *Ghosts of Mars* envisions the same minorities existing in the future, but with different overlords and the same discrimination. It's politically incorrect, perhaps, but again, classic, maverick Carpenter. He doesn't see humans as "evolving." The planet may change, the dominant gender may change, but our human nature won't. This is especially important in a film that pits man and woman against *another* kind of nature: Martian nature.

Many critics and viewers also seem to have a terrible time, as well, with the fractured narrative flow of *Ghosts of Mars*. The film's story is recounted as a series of progressive flashbacks within flashbacks. Again, the accusation was made that Carpenter's decision to utilize flashbacks was somehow random. This is not so. Consider that *Ghosts of Mars* concerns, in a very potent way, the differences between two species (Man and Martian). Then consider the ways in which these species are so very

different. One such difference is the fact that as human beings, we must rely on the *perspective of others*, on eyewitness testimony, on hearsay, on reports, if we hope to grasp the full picture. Because of that fact, humans have the luxury of denial; of discounting that which is unpleasant, or counter to expectations. They can deny the truth because they haven't seen "everything" with their own eyes. Indeed, this is exactly what the Matronage does, and the very reason it will lose the war with the single-minded Martians.

By contrast, the Martians, move from body to body with ease and impunity. They are, literally, *immortal*. When one corporeal host dies, the Martian parasites take another (if necessary, spending a period of time "on the wind" between possessions). What this means is that there is no such thing as "history," to a Martian. A Martian warrior is a witness *to all of history as part of his/her natural life span*. He need not depend on books to tell him of the past, or previous generations to inform him about codes of conduct or laws. The Martian is eternal.

The flashback story-structure of *Ghosts of Mars*—adopting the perspectives of humans Ballard, Braddock, Jericho and Wilson, among others—makes plain this very important distinction between species. As human beings we live on after death only in the memories of others. Again, this is completely unlike Martian nature, because the aliens move from body to body after corporeal death with no cessation. When Melanie becomes possessed by the Martians, Jericho gives her some "Clear." The chemical substance allows Ballard's mind to stay free (or again, *clear...*) of Martian influence, and at the same time she is witness to a montage representing the militant history of all of Mars. This is why Ballard ultimately fights back at Shining Canyon: she has seen the superior nature of the enemy, and realizes that it must be fought now, not later.

Ghosts of Mars also came out the same year as Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and shares much in common with that production. Both films concern a failed law enforcement action against a "primitive," but numerically superior force. Both films concern competing world views, and both films certainly involve a siege. In fact, *Ghosts of Mars* may be the ultimate genre film about asymmetrical warfare. Since Martians don't die—they just possess more bodies—it's almost a perfect metaphor for the Iraq War that began in 2003. One member of the insurgency dies; and another Martian pops up to replace him. These ideas resonate very strongly in the War on Terror Age, even if the film came out in the pre-9/11 age.

On a simpler level, Carpenter remains a classicist in terms of visuals. He is an expert at staging action, and he never once in *Ghosts of Mars* resorts to shaky cams, lens flare, or quick cuts to cloak his stunts. In this film, the audience always has a clear sense of where it is, the geography of the battlefield, and the combatants involved. Without resorting to the cheap tricks of the trade, Carpenter manages to make his film exciting, tense and, in the end, rather spectacular.

If you give it a chance, you may just grok John Carpenter's *Ghosts of Mars*.

Joy Ride * * *

Critical Reception

"A joy ride *Joy Ride* is not. But it's fun in a perverse, grab-your-date way, and a fair escape from the all-too-real terrors of life in the 21st century."—Jack Mathews, *New York Daily News*, October 5, 2001, page 67.

"Like Steven Spielberg's debut 1971 TV movie, *Duel*, *Joy Ride* gets much mileage out of the image of a hulking truck on the prowl, bearing down on its prey. Both directors let your imagination do much of the work; in neither movie do you ever see the driver, and the most unsettling scene here is when Lewis and Fuller can hear something nasty going on in that motel room but can't tell what it is. Other memorable set pieces find the truck roaring through a cornfield, Patsy Cline blaring out of its cabin, and, in another, the truck slowly smushing a car into a tree and then retreating menacingly into the shadows, lights off"—Mark Caro, *Chicago Tribune*: "*Joy Ride* heads toward quality thriller." October 5, 2001, page 7A1.

Walker doesn't have much screen presence, playing a vanilla hero. Sobieski also seems strangely vacant. Zahn makes the relationships work, adding a mischievous fury to his character that flavors each scene. The script inevitably begs comparison to *Duel*, Steven Spielberg's 1971 made-for-TV movie in which Dennis Weaver played a businessman menaced on a lonely road by an unseen trucker. Although its premise may not be original, *Joy Ride* is still tense, chilling escapism."—Andrew Breznican, *Associated Press*: "Joy Ride: Tense Escapism Rides like *Duel*," October 25, 2001.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Steve Zahn (Fuller); Paul Walker (Lewis); Leelee Sobieski (Venna); Jessica Bowman (Charlotte); Stuart Stone (Danny); Basil Wallace (Car Salesman); Brian Leckner (Officer Keeney); Mary Wickliffe, McKenzie Satherwaite (Police Desk Clerks); Dell Yount (Gas Station Mechanic); Kenneth White (Ronald Ellinghouse); Luis Cortes (Night Manager); Michael McCleery (Officer Akins); Jim Beaver (Sheriff Ritter); Rachel Singer (Gas Station Manager); Jay Hernandez (Marine); Ted Levine (Voice of Rusty Nail).

CREW: 20th Century-Fox, Regency Enterprises, Bad Robot, Live Planet in association with Epsilon Motion Pictures presents *Joy Ride*. Casting: Mali Finn, Emily Schweber. Production Designer: Rob Pearson. Costume Designer: Terry Dresbach. Special Effects: Spectrum Effects. Music: Marco Beltrami. Director of Photography: Jeffrey Jur. Film Editors: Eric L. Beason, Scott Chestnut, Todd E. Miller, Glen Scantlebury. Producers: J.J. Abrams, Chris Moore. Executive Producers: Jeffrey Downer, Bridget Johnson, Patrick Markey, Arnon Milchan. Written by: Clay Tarver and J.J. Abrams. Directed by: John Dahl. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A college student, Lewis (Walker), rents a car to pick up a young woman, Venna (Sobieski), for a road trip, but also ends up traveling with his no-account brother, Fuller (Zahn). The brothers get a CB radio to pass the time on their journey and pull a mean prank on a truck driver who goes by the handle "Rusty Nail" (Levine). In particular, Lewis pretends to be a female truck driver named Candy Cane and arranges a romantic rendezvous at a motel for Rusty Nail and the non-existent Candy. When Rusty Nail learns that he has been the butt of a prank, he turns murderous, threatening Lewis, Fuller, and Venna with murderous rage.

COMMENTARY: A superb entry in the "*road trip gone awry*" sub-genre, *Joy Ride* is a high-suspense, high-energy horror movie featuring spectacular stunts and boasting a never-ending sense of danger. More importantly, the horror is relevant to the start of the Web 2.0 age, all appearances to the contrary. One way to analyze the film meaningfully, for instance is to gaze at it as a text critical of the Internet.

In the film, brothers Lewis and Fuller use a CB Radio to pull a mean trick on an unstable trucker. The CB Radio stands in or substitutes for the Internet in a very meaningful way. In fact, the CB radio is even referred to in dialogue as being a kind of "*prehistoric internet*," because the '70s technology conveys similarly false impressions. Both communication via the Internet, and communication via the CB radio share an important quality. They give the user the impression of both invincibility and anonymity, when that impression is not actually true in either case. The imperiled characters in the film believe their actions have no consequences, and that they can't be held accountable for them. This is how people often feel in their online communications. The fact that an e-mailer or online commenter can't see the message recipient face-to-face makes the sender feel powerful, but also divorced from a sense of personal responsibility for his or her words. However, Fuller and Lewis learn from Rusty Nail that this is not actually the case. The trucker is able to track them down and hold them accountable for their behavior. And the idea that Rusty Nail is just a distant voice on a radio somewhere is also disproved rather thoroughly. So, even though *Joy Ride* utilizes an older form of technology, the CB radio, to score its points about the way humans communicate with one another, the film's questioning of technology makes it relevant in the age of internet predators, catfishing, and sock puppets.



Road trip gone wrong. Two views from *Joy Ride* (2001). Top: Fuller (Steve Zahn, left) and Lewis (Paul Walker) flee from a motel after their practical joke fails. Bottom: Lewis (Walker, left) and Fuller (Zahn) are naked, vulnerable, and at Rusty Nail's mercy as the tables are turned.

Lewis and Fuller have a difficult time, for example, convincing Rusty Nail that Candy Cane is their creation. They have created, in essence, a “fake” account to mislead him, and convincing him of the truth is not easy. Both CB Users and Internet users also have specially created “handles,” instead of names, as well.

Bathed in lurid shades of neon green and neon red in a literal reflection of motel and restaurant signs the characters encounter, *Joy Ride* also concerns another aspect of life in the Internet Age. In particular, the film recognizes that people, though interconnected by technology, remain very separate. Rusty Nail travels alone in his truck, a solitary figure. Yet he travels, as well, on a highway with thousands of vehicles. Despite the presence of all these other truckers, nobody knows him, or his true nature. He can hide in plain sight, just like any Internet predator might stalk a message board, or 4Chan. Again, it is impossible to read the film as anything but a critique of the Internet, wherein people cloak themselves behind fake fronts and handles that promote anonymity.

Joy Ride also gains mileage by featuring a toxic sibling relationship as its focal point. Fuller is an

absolute disaster that encourages Lewis's worst self and is even something of a bully. He makes a pass at Lewis's would-be girlfriend, Venna, even after knowing how his brother feels about her. He is also the person behind the prank that draws Rusty Nail's attention. Lewis may be weak and pliable, but Fuller is not the friend Lewis thinks he is, despite biological connections. Much of the film's tension arises from the audience's awareness that Fuller is going to get Lewis in some very bad trouble.

There is a long history in horror of "road" horror movies, such *Duel* (1972), and *The Hitchhiker* (1987). *Joy Ride* may not quite be in that class, but it is a good horror film because the film's creators put some serious thought into what the film would be about. *Duel* was about Man vs. Machine. *The Hitchhiker* concerned, right under the surface, a homo-erotic relationship played out through violence. *Joy Ride* takes place on a bricks and mortar highway but actually concerns the information highway, and the way that, in the 21st century, technology meant to connect people instead is utilized for trickery, malice, and personal gain, not to mention bloody vengeance.

Jurassic Park III ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"Less annoying than *Jurassic Park* or *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, this 2001 sequel isn't terribly frightening or gory, and at times it's even atmospheric. It also has a sense of humor: Tea Leoni's moony reaction shots intentionally send up the glossy idealism of the original."—Lisa Alspecter, *Chicago Reader*, June 24, 2019.

"Hollywood knew a money engine when it saw one, and this franchise is still clunking along today. The third outing into Michael Crichton's amusement park that's not amusing (no, not *Westworld*) was our first Spielberg-free ride (at least as far as the director's chair was concerned), and after the somewhat schlocky mess that was *The Lost World*, it was nice to give some other folks a shot.

"Director Joe Johnston has had a very mixed experience in Hollywood. He's had some major hits like the original *Jumanji*, then he gets films that should be enormous hits that just turn out to be 'only' pretty good (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, *The Rocketeer*). *Jurassic Park III* joins those last two as a pretty good film, competently made, just without the wow factor one would like.

Allegedly, there never was a completed script for *Jurassic Park III*. The fact that there was no Michael Crichton novel even informing the story for this film was always going to be trouble, but many cooks were in the screenplay kitchen for this film, and it should be said—this is not a bad film at all. It's a fairly safe film, borrowing many beats from the first film in the series. Sam Neill's return was welcome (we all love Jeff Goldblum, just not all the time).

One challenge for anyone making a *Jurassic Park* film is these dinosaurs are not Godzilla. You need to face them in a fairly low-tech environment to be threatened—it wouldn't take long with modern weapons to eliminate the threat. Yeah, the guys in *Jaws* could have brought a bazooka on the Orca, but *Jaws* was never about killing a shark—it was about surviving with a failing team.

Jurassic Park III isn't boring, it's fun, it's shorter than you remember (it's 92 minutes long)—it's also very safe, and that is its major flaw."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

"After blundering with the nihilistic second *Jurassic Park* back in 1997, Steven Spielberg smartly turned over directing duties for the third film to Joe Johnston (*Jumanji*). Johnston re-infuses the wonderment and fun house thrills found in the original blockbuster without the mean-spiritedness that turned many off to the sequel."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Sam Neill (Dr. Alan Grant); William H. Macy (Paul Kirby); Tea Leoni (Amanda Kirby); Alessandro Nivola (Billy); Trevor Morgan (Eric Kirby); Michael Jeter (Udesky); John Diehl (Cooper); Bruce A. Young (Nash); Laura Dern (Ellie); Taylor Nichols (Mark); Mark Harelik (Ben Hildebrand); Julio Oscar Mechoso (Enrique Cardoso); Blake Ryan (Charlie); Sarah Danielle Madison (Cheryl); Linda Park (Hannah).

CREW: Universal Pictures and Amblin Entertainment present *Jurassic Park III*. Casting: Nancy Foy, Wendy Washbrook. Costume Designer: Betsy Cox. Production Designer: Ed Verreux. Special Effects: Industrial Light

and Magic, Stan Winston Studio, Graphic Nature, Matte World Digital. Music: Don Davis. Director of Photography: Shelly Johnson. Film Editor: Robert Dalva. Producers: Larry Franco, Kathleen Kennedy. Executive Producer: Steven Spielberg. Based on characters created by: Michael Crichton. Written by: Peter Buchman, Alexander Payne, Jim Taylor. Directed by: Joe Johnston. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Kirbys (Macy and Leoni) recruit Dr. Alan Grant (Neill) and his apprentice, Billy (Nivola), to act as tour guides for a fly-by of Isla Sorna, Jurassic Park's Site B. Grant only reluctantly agrees, having lost both the love of his life, Ellie Sattler (Dern) and his love of dinosaurs. He's now a man without "faith."



Life—or death?—finds a way in *Jurassic Park III*. A Spinosaurus attacks a downed plane, and survivors (left to right) played by Michael Jeter, Alessandro Nivola, Tea Leoni, Sam Neill and William H. Macy.

Against Dr. Grant's wishes, the Kirbys' plane sets down on the dinosaur island, and Grant learns the truth about the flight. The Kirbys' young son, Eric (Trevor Morgan), went down on the island eight weeks earlier during a paragliding accident, and they are attempting to rescue him. While the group searches for young Eric, it must also contend with a giant Spinosaurus that is hunting them. Even worse, Billy has stolen two Velociraptor eggs, and the dangerous pack-hunters want them back...



The Spinosaurus attacks the survivors of a doomed expedition in Joe Johnson's *Jurassic Park III* (2001).

COMMENTARY: *Jurassic Park III* (2001) is a step-down in quality for what should have been a durable movie franchise. Although *Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997) featured a troublesome script and some considerable third-act problems, *Jurassic Park III* pales in comparison even to that sequel. In large part, this is because the action scenes featured here don't seem to escalate or build in any substantive fashion, and because the script—*about a rescue mission on Isla Sorna*—is distinctly minor league. On top of all that, the film features a mawkish sub-plot about a splintered family coming back together over the threats of imminent death-by-dino. About the only arena where the film truly works and works well is in the depiction of the dinosaurs, particularly the upgraded look of the awesome Velociraptors.

Joe Johnston (*The Rocketeer* [1991], *The Wolfman* [2010], *Captain America* [2011]) takes over the directing reins from Steven Spielberg for *Jurassic Park III*, and it's not a pretty sight. The third film is choppy and episodic instead of grand and spectacular, and even some should-be-great moments such as the franchise's first glimpse of an anklyosaurus are presented in half-hearted fashion, in the equivalent of a cutaway or insert shot. The film ends after only a scant 92 minutes, but even at that short length *Jurassic Park III* feels over-long because the movie is essentially a plot-less runaround, featuring no significant or meaningful narrative. *Jurassic Park III* is entertaining and often amusing, but today it just feels like small potatoes in comparison to the other series entries. Accordingly, *Jurassic Park III* is the franchise's *Son of Kong*: a fun film to revisit on occasion, but really only a shadow of the original.

The film that *Jurassic Park III* hopes to be is actually one of interest. It's the story of Dr. Alan Grant's loss of faith. Dr. Sattler has married another man and had a child with him. And the realities of Isla Nublar and Isla Sorna have totally changed how Grant views the profession of paleontology. His whole world has been turned upside down, and he has forgotten how to gaze at it with a sense of wonder. Upon seeing the dinosaurs again for the first time, Grant admits "*My God, I'd forgotten...*" and it's a nice character moment.

As usual, Sam Neill is terrific in this film, finding every scrap of good material in the lackluster script and augmenting it through his interpretation of the prickly Grant. Unfortunately, Dr. Grant's loss of faith is not at the center of the action. Instead time is wasted in the company of cartoon characters, comedy-relief mercenaries who may as well have the words "dinosaur fodder" stamped on their heads. They belong in another reality, not the hard-earned reality of the *Jurassic Park* franchise. And when the screaming, dopey mercenaries are gone, the movie seeks relentlessly to hammer home the Kirby reconciliation sub-plot, which is handled with extreme schmaltz and sentimentality.

The *Jurassic Park* movies have always mixed dinosaurs and families, but *Jurassic Park III* wants to consider this "walk in the park" some kind of family psychotherapy, with each Kirby realizing how much they love the others. After a while, the loving gazes and heartfelt stares are just a little too much to bear. If the subplot were handled with a greater degree of humor or subtlety, it might be tolerable, but the sentimentality factor is through the roof. Even worse, what seems absent from *Jurassic Park III* is Steven Spielberg's impressive capacity to transform an action "moment" into something truly epic, an example of multiplying chaos and tension. There are plenty of action scenes here to be certain, but they begin without lead up or pre-amble, rumble along quickly, and end before they make a real impression.

The battle between the Spinosaurus and the T-Rex is one prime example. It goes by so quickly that it almost feels like a throwaway. I should hasten to add, complex action scenes with dinosaurs are the reason we go to see these movies. Spielberg understood that fact, and even in *The Lost World* was able to construct a colossal amount of tension around a scene with a trailer hanging off a precipice. He was patient and thorough, making the audience experience each agonizing, chaotic moment. The action scenes in *Jurassic Park III* are veritable drive-bys in comparison.

The noble T-Rex saved the day at the climax of *Jurassic Park*, combating two vicious velociraptors and essentially saving the humans. The mighty T-Rex took center stage and held it magnificently (remember the fluttering banner "When Dinosaurs ruled the Earth?") Then, *The Lost World* revealed to us that the noble T-Rex species made good parents, and again, there was a sense of sympathy built up for the dinosaur. Like a lion, the T-Rex was the regal king of the jungle. Well, in *Jurassic Park III* a T-Rex gets bloodied and killed by the Spinosaurus in a matter of seconds and it seems rather ... *ignoble*. Obviously, the Spinosaurus is the Big Bad this time around, but it just feels like a cheap shot to treat the

T-Rex so shabbily. Had it put up a more sustained fight, or allowed the human heroes to escape, I might feel differently.

Is it crazy to feel kinship for a tyrannosaur? Perhaps so, but that's also what the *JP* movies are about: making audiences understand (and yes, love) the dinosaurs. We don't ever really know enough about the Spinosaurus or its habits (how it sees, for instance) to identify with it, hate it or love it. It's just a monster chasing the heroes. By contrast, the Velociraptors—*now sporting colorful stripes and small head fathers*—are handled very well here. The “dino lesson” in this installment involves the fact that raptors were “socially sophisticated” and could vocalize and communicate with each other. Grant informs the audience that Raptors were smarter than whales, dolphins or primates, and could have very well ruled the Earth if not for the asteroid that rendered them extinct. That said, *JP III* reveals their softer side. They have an opportunity, after recovering their eggs, to kill the human intruders, but don't take it. That feels a little anticlimactic, especially since U.S. Marines are about to arrive. Budget must have been a factor here, but just imagine a pitched battle between a Velociraptor pack and the Marines.

The pterodactyls are another high point in this sequel. They look absolutely amazing even-more-than-a-decade after the film was made, and their presence, unlike that of the Ankylosaurs, is well-integrated into the action. The best action scene in the film involves the Pterodactyls and the giant bird cage aviary where they make a home.

For so many reasons, *Jurassic Park III* feels like it suffers from sequel-itis. The characters are not particularly interesting, and frequently disposable. The movie is really short, as though the makers couldn't be bothered to give us our money's worth. And by and large the action of the film feels rushed and choppy. I am an absolute sucker for the dinosaur action as featured in all three original *JP* movies, but this one feels like it is phoning in the all-important sense of wonder. The few lines that re-hash the “Playing God” aspect of the film feel old and tired, too. One can't help but remember Ian Malcolm's discussions about arrogant scientists tampering with nature in the original film. The filmmakers behind the *Jurassic Park* series should have learned the same lesson. Just because they could make another sequel to *Jurassic Park* doesn't mean that they should have done so.

LEGACY: In 2015, the *Jurassic Park* series returned to the big screen with a bang, with *Jurassic World*. Another film, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, followed in 2018.

*Mimic 2 (DTV) * * **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Alix Koromzay (Remi Panos); Bruno Campos (Detective Klaski); Will Estes (Nicky); Gaven Eugene Lucas (Sal Gaurire); Edward Albert (Dark Suit); Jon Polito (Morrie Deaver); Jody Wood (Det. Clecknal). Jim O'Heir (Lou); Brian Leckner (Jason); Paul Schulze (Phillip); Michael Tucci (Dr. Shapiro); Joseph Hodge (Akkad); Alex Draper (O'Neal).

CREW: Dimension Films and Neo Art and Logic presents *Mimic 2*. Casting: Sarah Katzman. Production Designers: Deborah Raymond, Dorian Vernacchio. Costume Designer: Julie Schklair. Special Effects: David Wayne, Mike Bartak, Chris Walkowiak, Neo Digital. Director of Photography: Nathan Hope. Film Editing: Kirk M. Morri. Producers: Michael Leahy, Joel Soisson. Executive Producers: Cary Granat, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. Written by: Joel Soisson. Directed by: Jean de Segonzac. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Long after the eradication of the dangerous Mimic insects in New York City, a series of brutal murders occur near a high school in the Bronx, PS 400. An entomologist and teacher who works at the school, Remi Panos (Koromzay) begins to suspect that a Mimic insect is still alive, somehow, and still evolving. Worse, because it belongs to no hive and has no queen, its actions may be more

dangerous, unpredictable. Even as Panos undergoes relationship troubles with human males, she learns that the solitary Mimic male has set its romantic sights on her, as a potential queen. She and a student named Sal (Lucas) get trapped in the high school, as the Mimic goes on the attack.

COMMENTARY: To get the obvious out of the way first, *Mimic 2* can't compete on the same playing field as the great 1998 source material, directed by Guillermo Del Toro. This direct-to-video sequel doesn't have the money to do so, and it shows. That film painted a vast canvas showcasing multiple monsters and featured a whole sewer underworld beneath New York City. This low-budget follow-up features one monster, and some terrible CGI. And yet, the film is aware of its limitations and does the most within those limitations to depict a fascinating personal story. That story is even more fascinating, given that the film is executive produced by Harvey Weinstein, an apparent and oft-accused serial predator of women.

Mimic 2 focuses on a terrific hero, the intelligent, resourceful and neurotic entomologist, Dr. Remi Panos. The film spends a great deal of time obsessing on her love life, so audiences know precisely what she is dealing with. One male suitor, Jason, breaks down her apartment door when she rejects him. "*Oh my god, I'm a wacko magnet,*" she notes, blaming herself. And then there's the scene in which she goes on a date with a creepy fellow named Phillip, and it becomes clear that it isn't her that's the problem. It's the toxic men in the city. They are monsters, forcing their demands for Remi on her. It's gotten so bad that she keeps a wall of Polaroid photos on her apartment wall of all the failed attempts to find real love with a man. Her philosophy about bugs is one that could equally apply to the men of her species, as depicted in the film: "*They are what they are, no matter how you dress them up.*"

And then, fascinatingly, Remi becomes the target of another stalker, this time an insect one. This lone Mimic also falls for Remi. He is a single purposeless creature seeking a mate, because he comes from a colony with no queen. This idea is reinforced in a scene involving the classroom and ants. The audience witnesses the death of an ant who has become purposeless, because there is no queen to mate with, and to support. Without putting too fine a point on it, this is the story of the Mimic and this is the story of the men who demand Remi's love.

The only male in the film that Remi can truly have a meaningful relationship with is a child, Sal, who is able to view her as a friend and a mentor, not as a would-be romantic partner. So *Mimic 2* is all about insect behavior, yes, but it compares insect behavior to toxic masculinity, and paints a picture of a lonely woman who is the frequent target of that toxic masculinity. Ironically, as Remi notes, the male insect can learn from its mistake. Given the specimens of human masculinity featured in the film, that puts the insect on a higher plane. In the end, Remi all but sacrifices herself to the romantic insect. She uses her "female scent" to trick the monster and overwhelm the insect, giving others a chance to live.

Encoded here is a statement, perhaps, about why a woman may accept the unacceptable (a monstrous male mate), either to save a child, or for the well-being of others. It's no coincidence, either, that to lure the monster, Remi must disrobe. This is not exploitative. This is a notation—both literally and metaphorically—that the monster is attracted to her pheromones (on the clothes), and that what the men in Remi's life seek is sexual conquest, not connection. Essentially, Remi gives up what she wants (connection), and uses what the bug wants—sex—against it.

No, this is not the epic sweep of the first, big-budget film in the series. Instead, it is an intimate, and powerful story of lonely souls lost in an isolating urban setting. Making this tale even more meaningful, one can detect how, within its low budget, the filmmakers continue some of the visual touches of the source material. For instance, some scenes on street level, and in dark alleys retain the golden, autumnal look of *Mimic*, creating a continuity in imagery.

Mimic 2 boasts some missteps, to be certain. The CGI Mimic babies look terrible, as does a CGI helicopter featured at one point. And the subplot involving a secret government agency investigating the Mimic satellite colony is totally unnecessary, especially when dealing with such a compelling hero, and the fascinating tale that compares lovelorn insects to lovelorn men. These moments take away from the film, though the bad special effects are a result of the low budget and can be overlooked by horror fans

seeking to connect with a fascinating character and her story.

Given its limitations, *Mimic 2* is far better than it has any right to be, and carries a relevant, important meaning in the age preceding #MeToo. Thanks to lead actor Koromozy, there are haunting moments here, and some of the images rival the quality of her performance. At one point, imitating a detective, the Mimic Bug brings her flowers, evolving to be civilized, or at the very least, have a civilized approach to getting what it wants from her.

This is a weird, and oddly beautiful sequel that demonstrates how a low budget need not preclude ambitious or symbolic thinking.

The Others ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"The movie creates the sense that something is lurking in the shadows, something you can't quite see or feel until, like a cobweb, it clings to you out of thin air. Like the original version of *The Haunting*, *The Others* gets its scares largely from mood and suggestiveness. By example, it's a how-to textbook that demonstrates how misguided a special-effects, scare-free extravaganza like the 1999 remake of *The Haunting* is. With its tone of repressed emotion and focus on a young brother and sister, the new film also owes a debt to 1961's *The Innocents*."—Steve Murray, *The Atlanta Journal*, August 10, 2001, page 1.

"Only some bumpy, and passages in the script keep *The Others* out of the master class occupied by the likes of *The Sixth Sense* and, my favorite, 1961's *The Innocents*, based on Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*. When it comes to turning the screws of psychological terror, Amenabar is an expert technician."—Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone*, October 30, 2001, page 132.

"*The Others*, a tantalizing spine-tingler starring Nicole Kidman, indulges in all sorts of cobwebbed conventions—corridors that creak, shutters that bang and things that go bump—but don't be fooled into thinking you're safe from the machinations of the gifted Spanish filmmaker Alejandro Amenabar. Like *The Sixth Sense*, Amenabar's haunting melodrama comes with a twist that would make Linda Blair's head spin. At the same time, his tone and technique have more in common with Gothic fare like Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, and his story echoes Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. The tension mounts gradually. There are not spectral effects, so viewers must face their fear of the unknown, use their imagination. Amenabar works on the assumption that there is nothing scarier than what you see out of the corner of your eye, and he is aided enormously by Javier Aguirresarobe, the man behind the stalking camera."—Rita Kempley, *The Washington Post*, August 10, 2001, page C1.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Nicole Kidman (Grace); Fionnula Flanagan (Mrs. Mills); Christopher Eccleston (Charles); Alakina Mann (Anne); James Bentley (Nicholas); Eric Sykes (Mr. Tuttle); Elaine Cassidy (Lydia); Renee Asherson (Old Lady); Gordon Reid (Assistant); Keith Allen (Mr. Marlish); Michelle Fairley (Mrs. Marlish); Alexander Vince (Victor); Aldo Grilo (Gardener).

CREW: Dimension Films, Cruise/Wagner Productions, Sogecine, and Las Producciones del Escorpián present *The Others*. Casting: Shaheen Baig, Jina Jay. Production Designer: Benjamin Fernandez. Costume Designer: Sonia Grande. Special Effects: Cinesite, Daiquiri, F&P, Telson, The Weatherman. Music: Alejandro Amenabar. Director of Photography: Javier Aguirresarobe. Film Editor: Nacho Ruiz Capillas. Producers: Fernando Bovaira, Jose Luis Cuerda, Sunmin Park. Executive Producers: Tom Cruise, Rick Schwartz, Paula Wagner, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. Written and Directed by: Alejandro Amenabar. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Jersey, in 1945, a widow, Grace Stewart (Kidman), lives in a vast, dark estate with her photo-sensitive children, Anne (Mann) and Nicholas (Bentley). When the house's servants disappear without a trace, Grace welcomes three new ones: Mrs. Bertha Mills (Flanagan), Mr. Tuttle (Sykes), and

mute Lydia (Cassidy). They once worked at the house, many years earlier, and are familiar with the grounds and the estate. Nonetheless, Grace drills them about keeping the curtains closed, and unlocking only one room at a time. She is adamant that these precautions are necessary for the safety of the children. The servants agree to her strange terms. Soon, Anne detects frightening intruders in the house, including a boy named Victor. Grace becomes convinced that the house is haunted, and that Victor is the ghost of a dead child who once dwelt in their home. As the disturbances caused by the “Others” grow worse, Grace resolves to seek help from the local priest. She leaves the house and finds herself lost in a realm of endless mist. There, she encounters her presumed dead husband, Charles (Eccleston). He returns home and is disturbed to learn from Anne that Grace is growing more unhinged and temperamental by the day. After Charles inexplicably leaves the home, Grace attacks Anne; seeing the child not as her daughter, but as a sightless old woman. A terrified Anne attempts to flee the house with Nicholas, even as Grace makes a startling discovery about Mrs. Mills and the other servants.

COMMENTARY: *The Others* (2001) is a stylish and emotionally affecting horror film all about one thing: selective exposure. For those who want a specific definition of that term, selective exposure is an “individual’s tendency to favor information which reinforces their pre-existing views while avoiding contradictory information.” In the case of *The Others*, a widow, Grace (Nicole Kidman), believes she possess all the answers in her life; answers brought to her by experience, her religious upbringing, and Catholic dogma. However, in the course of the film, Grace comes to understand that she does not possess the sense of knowledge or control over her life that she believes she does. Specifically, she keeps interpreting her life—and the lives of her children, Anne and Nicholas, in terms of her faith’s precepts. In doing so, she refuses to see what’s really happening in her home. In short, she’s in denial. She denies what she did. And she denies that her existence now contradicts her faith.



They ain't afraid of no ghosts. A family portrait from *The Others* (2001). At center is Nicole Kidman as Grace, the matriarch. She is bracketed by her children Anne (Alakina Mann) and Nicholas (James Bentley).

Grace's journey in the film is one in which she is forced from her bubble of selective perception to encounter a larger, more mysterious and far less certain world. The most remarkable quality about *The Others* is that, via Alejandro Amenabar's direction and blocking choices, the visualizations reflect Grace's spiritual journey. Grace knowingly and obtusely keeps her children in the dark of an old country estate; always keeping the curtains drawn to block out sunlight. Similarly, Grace only keeps one room—out of dozens—unlocked in the house at any given time. This behavior also suggests her limitations as a thinker. She keeps all data locked away, in small boxes, exploring only small, separate pieces, so as to maintain the integrity of her world view.

Critics and film scholars have long compared *The Others* to a horror film of 1999, *The Sixth Sense*, because both productions end with a twist or revelation about the nature of the main characters. However, *The Others* establishes its own artistic identity ably. For example, the film obsesses on the impediments that Grace creates for herself and her children. Those impediments might fall under the umbrella category of “*mental rigidity*,” but are visualized in the films in terms of brick-and-mortar—or tangible—boundaries and barriers, whether they be iron gates, endless fog, locked doors, or sight-impairing curtains. The house is therefore a reflection of Grace's mental state of denial. *The Sixth Sense* is quite wonderful in its own approach, but it doesn't use the same creative device to vet its narrative. The twist at the end of *The Others* represents the long-awaited destination for Grace; a place where she can no longer hide or block the truth. All the boundaries that she has controlled and enforced, fall away.

And what is the truth Grace faces? That she acted in a way that is utterly contradictory to her stated belief system and faith. The closed gates, the locked doors, and the closed curtains, finally, aren't enough to maintain her illusions of belief. She can no longer hide from herself.

From the first frames of *The Others*, it is clear that Grace—whose name means “*God's favor*”—views the world through the orderly and comforting perspective of a devout Catholic. She recounts to her children the story of Genesis, when only God existed, and she exerts a strong sense of knowledge and control in terms of her surroundings. For instance, Grace reports that she doesn't like “fantasies” or “strange stories” and later, is described as only “believing” what she has been “taught.” In other words, Grace is a character believed “favored” by God, who dislikes mysteries, and who depends on the precepts of faith to understand the mysterious of existence. From her name and her recitation of the Genesis story, to her drilling of the children about the various realms of Hell or limbo, it is clear that Grace exists in a world in which she feels she knows the answers; or controls the answers. The audience see this sense of control played out in the actual physical lay-out of the house. Grace does not allow the children to move about freely because of their condition, and the result is that she controls the opening and closing of portals. She controls, as well, all light that enters the house, by keeping the drapes closed. She even controls sound, locking the piano so others can't play it. Her children dwell in the dark of the house, the dark imposed and continued by their mother's ministrations. The gate outside the house—which looks a lot like the vertical bars of a prison—further seal off Grace's realm from outside influence and beliefs. The only interlopers allowed into Grace's realm of order are the three servants, and, again, Grace seeks to rigorously control them and their actions. She questions them. She monitors them. She berates them for failing to live up to her rules.

As *The Others* develops, however, Grace gradually loses control over her sense of order. She hears children crying in the house, despite the safeguards she has erected to keep Nicholas and Anne in their specific and locked rooms. She also ignores the cognitive dissonance she faces by believing in the miracles of the Bible, but at the same time refusing to believe in the possibility of ghosts. She doesn't see Heaven and Hell, or a God-created universe as a “fantasy,” but ghosts she dismisses as such out of hand. The audience sees then that Grace chooses that which is acceptable to believe, and that which she decides is fantasy. But more and more, Grace's selective exposure of facts and details fail. She is continually confronted with things that make her question the controlled existence she patrols. She encounters her husband in the endless mist. *And he should be dead*. And she reckons with the macabre Book of the Dead, which represents a belief system about death and the afterlife different from her own. Finally, these challenges to Grace's epistemic closure prove too much to bear, and Grace loses the control she covets. Victor's parents rip down the curtains all at once, allowing “light” to flood into her dark

house. Instead of remaining locked, doors inexplicably open; refusing to keep secrets closed off, hidden away.

In the film's last moments, Grace must reckon with the truth that she can't control and can no longer hide; the fact that her carefully constructed reality is full of lies and untruths. She believes she is a good Christian, and yet she has actually murdered her own children, and committed suicide. Furthermore, there is no apparent Heaven in the afterlife. Rather, Grace and the children continue to exist in the house, an existence that will have no apparent end. She thus closes out the film thoroughly humbled. Grace even admits to Anne, "*I am no wiser than you are.*" This is the first uncertainty the character has expressed. From her recitation of the universe's creation, to her insistence about the shape of purgatory and Hell, to her refusal to accept her husband's death, or her own, murderous actions, Grace has seen only what she wished to see. Now, as the film ends, she realizes that the control she sought was an illusion, and that she has no great wisdom or insight about what lays ahead. Therefore, *The Others* concerns selective exposure, and the way it deludes us, as human beings; how we choose to perceive things only which fit into our acceptable world view. Grace "remakes" the house to her world view, only to see it change to reflect, finally, her new reality. The new house, which features light and open rooms, forces her to acknowledge what she did, and tried so hard to keep hidden; keep buried.

The biggest concern with *The Others*, as a work of art, involves the necessity of keeping the audience (as well as Grace's children), in the dark for so long. Much like *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Ghost* (1990), or any film in which the main characters are actually "already dead," the filmmakers must cheat, essentially, to keep the illusion of a living reality that resembles our own. Here, ghosts hold keys, lamps and shotguns. They sleep in beds, eat food, and drink tea. In other words, the ghosts act in such a way that it is impossible for us to reckon with the idea that they are not alive, at least until the big reveal comes.

If one dismisses this concern, and gazes instead at *The Others* as a story simply about a woman who works hard not to see her true nature and her crime, it is possible to understand the film as a remarkable character piece. Grace is so strong-willed that she nearly makes the afterlife bend to her "beliefs." Of course, in the end, that is a vain strategy, and Grace must reckon with what she has done, and what she actually is. Her pat, now-disproven views can't guide her to salvation. The last moments of the film suggest, ironically, that Grace still covets mortal things; reminding the children that the house is theirs and will remain so forever, no matter what "others" may come. As the camera pulls away from them, retreating through a window, there's the feeling that Grace has fashioned for herself and her children the very limbo she wished so much for them to avoid. This house will be their prison for eternity. It will not be the prison of denial, as it was before, but it will nonetheless be a prison; one that will house them and block them from change and therefore growth for time immemorial. Grace thus lives, ironically, in the clear absence of grace.

The Others succeeds to the degree it does for two reasons. First, Nicole Kidman's performance anchors the film beautifully. Secondly, *The Others* succeeds because it isn't really a film about a haunted house. Instead, it's about a haunted person; one who bends a large, dark house to her will and tries to reshape reality itself so as to avoid seeing the terrible thing she did to her children, and to herself. The miracle is that Grace succeeds for so long, before the scales fall from her eyes.

Route 666 (DTV) *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Lou Diamond Phillips (Jack La Roca); Lori Petty (Steph); Steven Williams (Frederick); L.Q. Jones (Sheriff Conaway); Dale Midkiff (P.T.); Alex McArthur (Nick); Mercedes Colon (Mary); Rob Roy Fitzgerald (Joe); Adam Vernier (Deputy Gil Conaway); Chester E. Tripp III (Deputy Tim Conaway); Rhino Michaels (John Ka Roca); Dick Miller (Bartender).

CREW: Lionsgate Films Home Entertainment presents *Route 666*. Casting: Aaron Griffith. Costume Designer: Erin Farrell. Production Designer: William Lakoff. Music: Terri Plumeri. Director of Photography: Philip Lee. Film Editor: Howard Flaer. Producer: Terence M. O'Keefe, William Winsley. Executive Producer: Cami Winikoff. Written by: Scot Fivelson, Thomas Weber, William Wesley. Directed by: William Wesley. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the ominously named Route 666, two Federal agents protecting a Federal witness, Frederick (Steven Williams), are hunted by an assassin hoping to keep him from making his court date. But much more mysteriously, the agents encounter strange, unkillable zombies on this forgotten road. These supernatural killers seem to be from a chain gang that was brutally murdered on the road years earlier. And one of the zombies is the long-dead father of Jack (Phillips), the NSA agent on the team. Now Jack must seek to understand what is happening and get his witness and team away from the supernatural location. Complicating matters, a local sheriff (Jones) knows more than he is letting on.

COMMENTARY: The road to Hell is paved with good intentions. Apparently, it is also paved with the bodies from crimes long forgotten in *Route 666*. The film involves a “condemned” section of highway in the southwest United States, one where the blood from the past informs the present. In particular, a local chain boss once killed the members of a chain gang, running them over with a paver, thus silencing them forever. The ghosts, or zombies, of those wrongfully murdered now seek vengeance by murdering anyone who happens upon this dangerous stretch of road.

Although there is much action here, it isn't handled in adroit fashion. A herky-jerky camera and speeded up footage work overtime to make the undead chain gang seem both menacing, and furious in their vengeful nature. A veteran of *The X-Files*, Steven Williams does all he can to enliven the material, but ultimately the film is victim to its own incoherence. For example, everyone keeps shooting the specters, even though bullets have no effect for most of the movie. Then, near the end of the movie, the zombies are affected by the bullets, and can be brought down by them. Similarly, the idea here is that the zombies appear whenever anyone steps on the pavement of Route 666, but again, the rule isn't applied in a consistent fashion.

At work here, thematically is the idea of the crime in the past, and an unjust fate for the prisoners on the chain gang. Yet the zombies pretty much murder and maim every passerby with equal rage. Eventually, the guilty sheriff shows up and is awarded his just punishment, but again, it's not clear how this supernatural force operates, or how it chooses its victims. The dark force kills assassins, witnesses, and law enforcement agents with the same vigor it goes after the architect of the injustice from the past, so it seems pretty indiscriminating. Also, it seems quite the coincidence that Jack should happen upon the precise spot where his father died, and hardly comments on it. How did fate bring him to his point? Why did it do so?

No answers are forthcoming.

Inconsistent and silly, *Route 666* is not a detour worth taking.

Session 9 (2001) * * * *

Critical Reception

"With the most effectively minimalist approach since *The Blair Witch Project*, Anderson and his co-writer Stephen Gevedon took as their inspiration one of the most ominous buildings in America, the abandoned Danvers Mental Hospital outside Boston.... Anderson, his superb ensemble cast and inspired cinematographer Uta Briesewitz (shooting with the new Sony CineAlta 24P HD cameras) appeal at once to the intellect and the emotions as they build suspense and tension mercilessly, at the same time raising issues of class and the plight of the mentally ill.... *Session 9* is so effective that its sense of uncertainty lingers long after the theater lights have gone up."—Kevin Thomas, *The Los Angeles Times*: Scary *Session 9* Takes a Minimalist Approach. August 10, 2001, page F4.

"Director's Brad Anderson's 2001 film is even more effective and creepy because it is shot on digital video. Unlike, say *The Blair Witch Project* which was not effective at all after viewers found out that it was fake, *Session 9* does not have that problem because of the asylum itself, which in reality really did house the mentally disturbed in Massachusetts. The building itself is a character all its own and it is the real star of this creepy indie gem.... *Session 9* effectively highlights individuals' personal turmoil and inner demons and places them on top of a canvas of insanity and horror. It is one of the more disturbing and realistic genre films in years and it lingers in your psyche far longer than any piece of cinema you have devoured from mainstream in years."—Raymond Partsch, *The Town Talk*, September 9, 2003, page 11.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Peter Mullan (Gordon Fleming); David Caruso (Phil); Stephen Gevedon (Mike); Paul Guilfoyle (Bill Griggs); Josh Lucas (Hank); Brendan Seston III (Jeff); Charles Broderick (Security Guard); Larry Fessenden (Craig); Jurian Hughes (Voice of Mary Hobbes); Sheila Stasack (Wendy).

CREW: USA Films, and Scout Productions present *Session 9*. Casting: Sheila Jaffe, Georgianne Walken. Production Designer: Sophie Carlhian. Costume Designer: Aimee McCue. Special Effects: VCE.com. Music: Climax Golden Twins. Director of Photography: Uta Briesewitz. Film Editor: Brad Anderson. Producers: Dorothy Aufiero, David Collins, Michael Williams. Executive Producer: John Sloss. Written by: Brad Anderson and Stephen Gevedon. Directed by: Brad Anderson. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An overworked and exhausted company owner, Gordon (Mullan), in need of cash, and with a new baby at home, underbids on a colossal job: an asbestos remediation task at the long-abandoned Danvers State Hospital. With a tiny crew including Phil (Caruso), Mike (Gevedon) and Hank (Lucas), Gordon sets about completing the impossible job on the isolated facility, which was built in 1871 and used as a mental hospital for years. The hospital is a dilapidated wreck, and the job ahead impossible. Gordon begins to hear menacing voices in the facility, even as a dark presence, possibly related to a former patient—whose voice is also heard on old reel-to-reel tapes—threatens the team. Soon, the workers begin to disappear, one by one.

COMMENTARY: There's a school of thought regarding movies that goes along these lines: If you don't like a film—or *think you could do it better*—then, go ahead and make one in response. Or, simply stated, the best answer to criticisms about one movie may be producing *another movie*. In intriguing and careful fashion, Brad Anderson's *Session 9* (2001) lives up to that notion because it's a very well-played, very atmospheric variation on Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), but one that successfully skirts the line that *The Shining*, finally, tripped over. This author is as devoted an admirer of *The Shining* as the next horror enthusiast, for a variety of reasons, and in *Horror Films of the 1980s* rated the film four stars out of four. But at a certain point in the film's narrative, Kubrick sacrifices the ability to play the drama of Jack Torrance and his family on two parallel tracks simultaneously.

The story is either about a haunted place, the Overlook Hotel, or about a man who has lost his

marbles entirely under his own auspices, Jack Nicholson's Torrance. Ultimately, *The Shining* makes a choice that it is indeed ghosts who spur Torrance's mental degeneration and that the Overlook is actually "haunted." We know this, in part, because ghosts unlock old Jackie boy from a freezer where his wife, Wendy, has trapped him. *Freezers don't unlock themselves*. I'm not stating categorically that ambiguity is the best way to present a cinematic ghost story. Only that with ambiguity comes *uncertainty*. And feeling "uncertain" during a movie fosters a sense of uneasiness and terror in audiences. Bluntly stated, those are always good vibrations for horror films to tap into. *Session 9* boasts many similarities to *The Shining*, right down to its formal structure.



Above: Gordon (Peter Mullan) explores the ruins of Danvers State Hospital in *Session 9*. Below: Mullan takes direction from Brad Anderson on the set of the same film.

Like *The Shining*, *Session 9* uses title cards on a black background to periodically interrupt the narrative and remind viewers of the passage of time. And also like *The Shining*, *Session 9* occurs mostly at one, fearsome and intimidating setting, in this case the abandoned, blighted Danvers State Mental Hospital. *Session 9*'s tag-line, "*Fear is a Place*" could also advertise for *The Shining* in a pinch. More importantly, *Session 9* and *The Shining* both concern a man experiencing trouble with his family (Gordon [Peter Mullan]) in the former, and Nicholson's struggling writer in the latter. And, both films

also feature first act “tours” of the landscape, of the imposing structure that quickly proves the fulcrum of the action. Furthermore, in both efforts, a tour guide—Ullman in *The Shining* and Griggs (Paul Guilfoyle) in *Session 9*—relates the long, tortured history of the place, setting the stage for the trauma to come.

And what a place that audiences visit in *Session 9*. Built in 1871 and closed in 1985, Danvers State Hospital is a self-contained town of sorts, with a church, a movie theater and even a bowling alley. The patients’ rooms are called “seclusions” and the facility housed 24,000 mentally deranged people at its height. The hospital is also known, not pleasantly, as the locale where the “pre-frontal lobotomy was perfected.” It is this empty, desolate castle where Gordon—“*The Zen Master of Calm*” according to his colleagues—and his three co-workers (Phil [David Caruso], Hank [Josh Lucas] and Jeff [Brendan Sexton]) attempt an impossible job—*asbestos abatement*—in just one week’s time. Hank and Phil don’t like each other either, which makes the work all the more difficult. And Gordon’s wife has just given birth to the couple’s first baby, meaning that he isn’t getting any sleep. He’s on edge, he’s exhausted, he’s short-tempered. On Gordon’s first sojourn through the vast, abandoned hospital, something disturbing occurs. He hears a disembodied voice welcome him. “Hello, Gordon,” it says. Later, the same voice seems to convince him, “*You can hear me.*” And worst of all, the creepy voice matches exactly the voice heard on an old patient session tape; the voice of a person *with multiple personalities*, one who claims to live inside “the *weak*” and the “*wounded.*” As the days pass by in the storyline, the tension in the film mounts by degrees.

To bring up another classic horror film, *Session 9* reminds one a bit of *The Amityville Horror* (1979). Stephen King very ably described in his book, *Danse Macabre*, how that film doesn’t really concern ghosts so much as it does a fear of home ownership and financial ruin: the mortgage you can’t pay, the heating bill you can’t afford, and so forth. *Session 9* generates much of its suspense from Gordon’s impossible schedule, his desperate need for money, the dangerous nature of removing asbestos, the necessary precautions to do it safely, and his apparent estrangement from his wife at home. As Phil and Hank bicker, the clock ticks down, accidents occur, and an impossible job becomes all the more impossible. Director Brad Anderson also peppers his film with intimations of something far more sinister than human nature, or pending deadlines, however. Specifically, he suggests something evil creeping out of the very woodwork at Danvers. There is a discussion, early on, of Satanic Ritual Abuse Syndrome, for instance. And a poster on a wall inside Danvers reads, “*Suddenly, it’s going to dawn on you,*” and sure enough, the audience begins to get the unshakable vibe from those voices and other dark happenstances that there is something far more monstrous, and even supernatural at work in this ruined place.

One scene, set in a dark basement at night, and featuring Hank, quickly proves incredibly terrifying. Hank is alone, in a long dark, subterranean corridor when he hears noises somewhere behind him. And then a figure, *a shadow* appears in the distance, and the viewer’s adrenalin skyrockets. By this point, the movie has raised so much uncertainty and fear that little things like that carry tremendous impact. When Gordon’s team members begin to show up lobotomized—their eyes bleeding—your mind will really go into over-drive asking questions: *which of these men boasts the knowledge to perform the act?* Or—even more alarmingly—does that knowledge of the procedure come from the spirit of the edifice itself? Is one of the men possessed?

And that pondering inevitably brings me back to *The Shining* (1980). Unlike that film, Anderson here draws out the ambiguity to almost unbearable, gut-wrenching lengths, so that viewers frantically ping-pong between explanations. Either the source of the evil is human frailty; or it is the Danvers’ living, sentient Id, let loose to play. Commendably, Anderson never reveals his hand, and so even when the film ends, the images continue to linger in the imagination. This is one movie which will have you mentally replaying scenes for clues over a span of days.

Session 9 is a resourceful and careful film. It’s masterpiece of mood too; a low-budget horror film that succeeds by suggesting, not showing the forces at work on the characters. And the setting itself,—especially the Psych Wing—is utterly terrifying. Like *House of the Devil* (2009), this film has mastered the art of the anxiety-provoking build-up, the set-up that just keeps inching and inching along until it

grabs you by the throat. In this case, Anderson does out “session” tapes down in the records room, a little bit at a time. Every time these recordings answer a question in the larger puzzle, they raise another one.

In this review, *Session 9* has been compared to *The Shining* (1980), *The Amityville Horror* (1979) and *House of the Devil* (2008), and frankly, it's a film that deserves to be considered in such rarefied company. The movie's structure is highly reminiscent of *The Shining*, but audiences will appreciate how Anderson has extended his story's sense of ambiguity to almost torturous lengths as a key differentiating quality. What's actually amazing about *Session 9* is that, without Kubrick's budget, studio sets and extensive shooting schedule, Anderson has managed to convey in *Session 9* the substantive, inescapable, suffocating feeling of being trapped in a place that is truly evil.

That's no small accomplishment, and *Session 9* will really rattle your senses, whether or not you are the “Zen Master of Calm,” like Gordon.

Soul Survivors * *

Critical Reception

“Though this could have been a great modern-day redux of *Carnival of Souls*, sadly it turns into a mediocre *Twilight Zone*-esque tale stretched beyond recognition to a feature-length running time.”—Carl Cortez, *Cinescape*, Issue #56, January 2002, page 48.

“This film comes perilously close to being another below-average teen horror flick, but is saved by Sagemiller's honestly nutty performance and director Carpenter's intriguing vision of what is seen by a person with a severe head injury. Although most of the important mysteries are explained in the final reel, there are many minor details left unanswered. The backing performances by the actors playing Cassie's friends are nothing special, although Dushku does give Annabel a sharp sense of attitude. But even with its faults, *Soul Survivors* is a serviceable entry in the low-budget horror column and makes the most of its limited resources with stirring imagery and a full-blown performance by its star.”—John R. McEwen, *The Republican*, September 7, 2001.

“Between the accident scene and its conclusion, *Soul Survivors* is an exercise in spinning wheels, a muddle of images, ideas, and characters (such as Angela Featherstone's androgynous lesbian role) that don't go anywhere, let alone make any sense. Writer-director Steve Carpenter was obviously going for a dream-like atmosphere, but even when taking such a surreal bent, events should follow some sort of internal logic. They don't here; one scene has Cassie having a major row with a friend, and the next scene has the friend cheering her on at a swim meet. Cassie's visions are supposed to instill horror, but would-be shocks such as a rather violent nosebleed and a shot of blood going down a bath drain aren't exactly the stuff that nightmares are made of.”—Michael DeQuina, *The Movie Report*, October 9, 2001.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Melissa Sagemiller (Cassie); Wes Bentley (Matt); Casey Affleck (Shawn); Eliza Dushku (Annabel); Angela Featherstone (Raven); Luke Wilson (Jude); Allen Hamilton (Dr. Haverston); Ken Moreno (Hideous Dancer); Carl Paoli (Deathmask); Barbara Robertson (Margaret); Richard Pickren (Ben); Candace Kaye Kroslack (Cool Blond).

CREW: Artisan Entertainment, Lost Soul Productions and Original Film present *Soul Survivors*. Casting: Anne McCarthy, Mary Vernieu. Costume Designer: Denise Wingate. Production Designer: Larry Fulton. Music: Daniel Licht. Director of Photography: Fred Murphy. Film Editors: Janice Hampton, Todd Ramsay. Producers: Stokely Chaffin, Neal Moritz. Executive Producers: Jon Shestack, Michele Weisler. Written and Directed by: Steve Carpenter. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A college student, Cassandra (Sagemiller), joins with her boyfriend, Shawn (Affleck), and their friends, Annie (Dushku), and Matt (Bentley), for a frat party. Both Shawn and Matt are

romantically attracted to Cassie, and Shawn sees Cassie kiss Matt before the night is out. After the party, while Cassie is driving, the foursome is involved in a horrible car accident. Shawn is apparently killed, but Cassandra begins to feel that something is amiss with reality. She is hounded by strange figures from the party, and unusual noises. Finally, unable to get any respite, she seeks help from a kindly local priest (Wilson). As the weird incidents continue, and Cassandra is visited by the specter of Shawn, she begins to understand that reality is not exactly as it seems.

COMMENTARY: *Soul Survivors* is a “soulless,” empty, and brazen attempt to remake the original *Carnival of Souls* (1960) without crediting that film. This milquetoast, PG-13 horror film, like that low-budget classic, involves a young woman who survives a car accident only to dwell in a world that feels “wrong,” or unearthly to her. Only later does the character realize that she may be dead, or dying, as is the case here, and that the world she is living in is a kind of purgatory or after-life.

Slow-paced and obvious, this is one of those horror movies in which the audience is ahead of the filmmakers all along, making the narrative a tedious slog. For example, it is obvious from his first appearance that the priest played by Luke Wilson is some kind of otherworldly figure or “guardian angel”—type that others don’t see or at the very least is not what he appears to be. This character goes back at least as far as 1980s characters such as Amanda Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (1987), and no doubt further.

Cassandra—named after the ancient Greek mythical figure who could see the future but was doomed never to be believed—undertakes a kind of Orphean odyssey in the film, only to wake up in a hospital at the end of the film, and realize that everything she has witnessed is but a death-bed delusion. Had she stayed in that “unreal” world any longer, instead of returning at Shawn’s urging, she would have dwelled there forever, along with Matt and Annie, who are really dead. The plot, and its outcome, are totally predictable, and the only thrills involve the occasional appearances by the “weird guys” at the club, who are in some way responsible for the car accident.

What *Soul Survivors* seems to miss, completely, is any kind of moral reckoning for Cassie about her life, or how she has lived it. A film like *Flatliners* (1990) asked the viewer to consider an after-life in which one had to pay for one’s immoral actions in life. There were, in the realm of the dead, costs to behaving badly on the mortal coil. Here, Cassie is indecisive in her relationships, and kisses Matt when she is dating Shawn, and certainly she engages in some heavy party-going in the overly long, aggressively edited frat party scene at the film’s start. But the film doesn’t ask for its protagonist, Cassie, to learn anything from her life or the reason it matters. She misses Shawn, and wishes he were alive, but that’s about the depth of the discourse in the film. There is no deeper meaning to the story, and *Soul Survivors* seems to suggest that Annie and Matt deserve to die, to linger in that “unreal” world forever, but again, no case is made for or against their morality or behavior. The end result is that they just seem unlucky and the afterlife appears fickle.

Soul Survivors premiered on September 7, 2001, the final weekend before the terrorist attacks of September 11 occurred, and that date seems meaningful, as horror films were to pivot radically following that national tragedy. In the post-9/11 world, *Soul Survivors* feels like an empty product in search of what it wants to say about its world, and its time. The apocalypse here is personal, a little trivial, and even selfish. Cassie finds her way back to the real world of the living, but hardly seems shaken that two of her best friends don’t make the journey with her. After 9/11, horror movies at least seemed consequential, something which can’t be said for *Soul Survivors*.

Thir13en Ghosts ★ ★

Critical Reception

...Beck spends plenty of effort on grisly makeup and computer-generated effects but little on establishing any real suspense. Right from the opening set piece—a ghost hunt in an auto graveyard—the movie is frantic and confusing, but not all that scary. William Castle may not be spinning in his grave, but he should at least be rattling a few chandeliers around his daughter's house. For a movie called *Thirteen Ghosts*, this movie is surprisingly soulless.”—John Monaghan, *Detroit Free Press*: “Phantom Menace: *Thirteen Ghosts* Remake is Merely Ghastly,” October 26, 2001, page E1.

“...*Thirteen Ghosts* provides what it promises: disturbing images, occult musings and a few decent scares. The MTV-style ghosts, too, set a new standard for frightening. Any renters dying for (pardon the pun) a passable horror flick will find this one keeps them out of the grave.”—Jared Krywicki, *Video Store Magazine*, March 3–9, 2002, page 24.

“If Tony Shalhoub seems woefully underutilized, most of the rest of the cast members resort to exaggerated camp. The Casting of Rah Digga (who hasn't appeared in a film since) as the babysitter of Shannon Elizabeth (who is actually a year older) throws the whole concept out of whack from the first act, even though the story could have easily been tweaked to accommodate both actors. However, Digga gets all the silly punchlines while Elizabeth is forced to utter dialogue clearly written for a child. F. Murray Abraham seems to relish the opportunity for expressive villainy, while Matthew Lillard and Embeth Davidtz chomp their scenery in ways which are cringeworthy rather than entertaining.”—Nicholas Bell, *Ion Cinema.com*, June 29, 2020.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Tony Shalhoub (Arthur Kriticos); Embeth Davidtz (Kalina Oretzia); Matthew Lillard (Dennis Rafkin); Shannon Elizabeth (Kathy Kriticos); Alec Roberts (Bobby Kriticos); J.R. Bourne (Benjamin Moss); Rah Digga (Maggie Bess); F. Murray Abraham (Cyrus Kriticos); Matthew Harrison (Damon); Jacob Rupp (Assistant); Mikhael Speidel (The First Born Son); Daniel Wesley (The Torson); Laura Mennell (The Bound Woman); Kathryn Anderson (The Withered Lover); Craig Olejnik (The Torn Prince); Shawna Loyer (The Angry Princess); Xantha Radley (The Pilgrimage); C. Ernst Harth (The Great Child); Laurie Soper (The Dire Mother); Herbert Duncanson (The Hammer); Shayne Wyler (The Jackal); John De Santis (The Juggernaut).

CREW: Warner Bros., Columbia Pictures, and Dark Castle Entertainment presents *Thir13en Ghosts*. Casting: Christie Sheaks. Production Designer: Sean Hargreaves. Costume Designer: Jenni Gullett. Music: John Frizzell. Special Effects: KNB Effects Group, Dillon Armitage, X, Charles Belardinelli. Director of Photography: Gale Tattersal. Film Editing: Derek G. Brechin, Edward A. Warschilka. Producers: Gilbert Adler, Joel Silver, Robert Zemeckis. Executive Producers: Dan Cracchiolo, Steve Richards. Story: Robb White. Written by: Neal Marshall Stevens, Richard D'Ovidio. Directed by: Steve Beck. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A down on its luck family, led by patriarch Arthur Kriticos (Shalhoub), inherits the strange estate of an occult investigator, Cyrus Kriticos (Abraham). Arthur moves into the house with his children (Elizabeth, Roberts) and a nannie (Digga), only to find that the house is actually a device that contains and entraps the spirits of a dozen malevolent ghosts. These spirits can only be seen, however, when wearing special goggles. With the help of another occult investigator, Rafkin (Lillard) and a psychic, Kalina (Davidtz), the family attempts to unravel the mysteries of the house and its malevolent thirteenth ghost.

COMMENTARY: *Thir13en Ghosts* is difficult to watch. It is actually difficult to look at. Almost everything else about this remake of the 1960 low-budget William Castle horror film is secondary to that important fact about visualization. The “device” that comprises the interior of the haunted house here is a series of transparent containment chambers housing captive ghosts, but all the chambers look alike, and there are little or no distinctions between rooms for points of reference. The cages are transparent, which means that there are no solid, opaque walls, or wall decorations to help ground the viewer in the geography of the location. Accordingly, it is virtually impossible to tell where, specifically, the action is occurring, or where characters are located in the house, at least in relation to other rooms in the house, at any given time. The film's central idea: a house as a kind of rotating, moving engine that entraps ghosts is a good one, but the visualization of it is absolutely incoherent, so much so that the film,

at times, becomes visually incomprehensible. Some audience members who saw the film in theaters also complained about the strobing, pulsing lights often featured in the film, and warned of seizure danger. For all its visual innovation, this film is noisy and painful to watch. Forget *Thir13en Ghosts*, have Thir13en Tylenol at the ready while watching.



Three views of *Thir13en Ghosts* (2001). Left: Cyrus Kriticos (F. Murray Abraham) reads the handwriting on the wall. Middle: A ghost—"Suicide Woman"—stares at us. Right: Dennis Rafkin (Matthew Lillard, left) and

Arthur Kriticos (Tony Shalhoub) confront a house filled with malevolent spirits.

Despite the irresistible hook of glasses, or rather “*spectral viewers*” which allow mortal men and women to gaze into the spirit world, *Thir13en Ghosts* doesn’t achieve much either, in terms of terror. The film suggests that ghosts can be imprisoned by containment spells (a runic alphabet of sorts) written on transparent prison cells walls and floors in the house, and then equips the gaggle of spirits with earthly weapons, a fact which raises an interesting point. If a ghost is carrying a weapon, is the weapon real, and can it actually hurt people? Or is it an extension of the ghost, a supernatural manifestation, and therefore intangible? Does a spiritual axe do physical damage to real flesh? How exactly does that work? Similarly, how come the ghosts only attack when seen by characters wearing the spectral viewers? Certainly, it would make more sense if the ghosts in the house attacked people who couldn’t see them, right? The movie doesn’t answer these questions, which raises some issues in terms of the danger the characters face.

One facet to appreciate in *Thir13en Ghosts* is the design of the individual ghosts themselves, such as the Jackal, who is described as “*The Charles Manson of Ghosts*,” and there is no doubt that this is a unique film in terms of its radical and different (if confusing) set design. Yet it is so busy visually that the imagery distracts from characterization and story. The supernatural seems mundane instead of genuinely scary. As reflected by the moveable nature of the house interior, the supernatural is simply a puzzle to be solved, not a force of genuine awe and metaphysics.



Two more views from *Thir13en Ghosts* (2001). Top: Dennis Raffkin has a monkey, er, ghost, on his back. Bottom: Kathy Kriticos (Shannon Elizabeth) and Arthur Kriticos (Tony Shalhoub) explore a dark corridor of a

Again, the big takeaway here is the nature of the haunted house, which involves machinery and moving panels. A few years after this *AVP* (2004) would utilize the same idea for an underground temple. Basically, it's the notion of an interior that can completely reshape its nature. In haunted house movies, the central setting is usually a metaphor for something, a character's twisted brain, a society that is crumbling, and so forth, mounting utility bills. So, it's all too easy to read a deeper meaning into such a concept here. America, in the 2000s, might be defined as a house reshaping itself, post-Y2K, or post-9/11, or again later, after the election of Obama. However, in this case, such a reading would seem a stretch, because the film doesn't tie the reshaping interior of the haunted house to any specific social or cultural context. It is true that Arthur's family begins the film in a small apartment, living in poverty. The family enters the upper class by inheriting a house that isn't what it seems, and which possesses hidden dangers, so perhaps the deeper meaning is one about changing economic class in America, and the problems, hiding in plain sight, of moving into the new, richer class.

But again, even for this author—who loves searching for subtext and finding evidence in the film to support it—that reading could be termed nothing less than a Hail Mary. Instead, the film settles on reinforcing generic family bromides about how *“love is the most powerful energy.”* It's positive and uplifting, sure, but ultimately nothing deep enough or intriguing enough to merit sitting through a film in which all the sets look the same and it is impossible to glean a sense of place.

One character in the film notes that *“we're in the middle of a machine designed by the dead and powered by the dead,”* and *Thir13en Ghosts* indeed feels like a machine, one that is beautiful on a glance, but doesn't seem to be working correctly, the closer it is examined. All the bells and whistles of the film don't cohere, so that, finally, we are left with no choice but to agree with another character's assessment of the plot: *“enough with all this haunted house nonsense.”*

Tremors 3: Back to Perfection (DTV) * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Michael Gross (Burt Gummer); Shawn Christian (Jack Sawyer); Susan Chuang (Jodi Chang); Charlotte Stewart (Nancy Serngood); Ariana Richards (Mindy Sterngood); Tony Genaro (Miguel); Barry Livingston (Dr. Merliss); John Pappas (Agent Rusk); Robert Jayne (Melvin Plug); Billy Rieck (Buford); Mary Gross (Tourist).

CREW: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment and Stampede Entertainment present *Tremors 3: Back to Perfection*. Casting: Craig Campobasso. Costume Designer: Debbie Shine. Production Designer: Ken Larson. Music: Kevin Kiner. Director of Photography: Virgil L. Harper. Film Editor: Dark Silliman. Producer: Nancy Robert. Executive Producer: S.S. Wilson. Story by: S.S. Wilson, Brent Maddock, Nancy Roberts. Written by: John Whelpley. Directed by: Brent Maddock. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG. Running time: 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Survivalist Burt Gummer (Gross) kills several shriekers in Argentina and then returns to the town of Perfection, where it has been eleven years since the last graboid attack. Upon his return, he finds that an opportunist, Jack Sawyer is running a tourist trap/graboid safari experience there. Before long, however, the graboids return, and Burt agrees to hunt the creatures, even as the U.S. Government declares the monsters an endangered species and wants all the denizens of Perfection to evacuate.

COMMENTARY: The third installment in the long-lived, but ultimately low-rent *Tremors* film franchise

introduces the third iteration of the graboid threat to the franchise: the high-flying ass blasters. These ass-blasters can launch themselves into the air—or “*light their farts on fire*”—and rain “*death from above*” on their victims. One of the film’s most enjoyable moments sees the protagonists arguing over what to name this next evolution of graboid. Other names entertained include “*butt launchers*” and “*blast-offers*.”

Beyond that lightly amusing moment, however, the third *Tremors* installment is light on thrills, and comedy, not to mention budget. This time out, A-listers Fred Ward and Kevin Bacon are missing in action, leaving Michael Gross’s second-string, right-wing extremist character, Burt, to take center stage. His house gets destroyed (again!) and he goes up against some very poorly rendered CGI graboid monsters, leading up to the big battle against an albino graboid, or “*Great White Graboid*” he names “*El Blanco*.” Think “*Stumpy*” in 1990’s original film, and you get an idea of the man vs. monster dynamic here. In his conflict with the worm, Burt quotes Moby Dick (“*Call me Ishmael*”) and fights his way through the “*ass blaster blitzkrieg*.” The most ironic thing about Burt’s character is the fact that that this conspiracy-loving, government-hating, “*don’t tread on me*” personality clearly forecasts the rise of the Tea Party at the end of the decade, years after the film’s release. At the time of the film’s release, early in the decade, he was a figure for mocking and fun, but not more than ten years hence, his radical, conspiracy theory-laden ideas would move into the mainstream of American political thinking.

The movie is subtitled “*Back to Perfection*,” because it features a return to the setting of the first *Tremors* and features a return of (minor) characters from that film, including Miguel, Penny, and Melvin. The film also re-introduces Chang’s grocery, now run by his daughter. There is nothing unpleasant about revisiting the locale or the characters, but the problem is that there is no terror in the film, and no real suspense, either. Ironically, *Back to Perfection* worsens the quality slide begun in *Tremors 2: Aftershocks* (1987) making the film further, in theory, from the “*Perfection*” of the original. The decade would produce another inferior film, a prequel, in its next 2000s outing.

LEGACY: The *Tremors* brand has continued long beyond *Back to Perfection*. In 2003, The Sci-Fi Channel aired a short-lived *Tremors* TV series. Direct-to-video sequels followed the *Tremors 4* prequel, including *Tremors 5: Bloodlines* (2015), *Tremors: A Cold Day in Hell* (2018) and 2020s *Shrieker Island*.

Valentine * * ½

Critical Reception

“All the women except Kate are portrayed as arrogant, unpleasant and cold. The men come off as creeps or drunks or con men. Sad to say, as written, most of these characters deserve their fate.”—Robert Nott, *The Santa Fe New Mexican*: “*Valentine: Love’s Labour Loses Out*.” February 9, 2001, page 58.

“Credibility and intelligence are pretty thoroughly battered, too, and you don’t want to know what’s in the film’s only box of chocolates.”—Jay Carr, *The Spectator*, February 2001, page C12.

“*Valentine*, based on a novel by Tom Savage, was directed by Jamie Blanks, the guy behind *Urban Legend*, another pre-modern throwback. His technique involves filming people walking slowly just before they are jumped from behind and slaughtered in the most gruesome ways imaginable. The tension lies mostly in trying to get enough light so you can look at your watch, and in trying to remember how many more characters there are to kill before it’s going to be over. In fact, I can’t swear that some of them weren’t killed twice.”—Jay Stone, *Calgary Herald*: “Cupid carries a butcher knife: *Valentine* can only bring on a bad case of heartburn.” February 4, 2001, page C3.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Denise Richards (Paige); David Boreanaz (Adam); Marley Shelton (Kate); Jessica Capshaw (Dorothy Wheeler); Jessica Cauffiel (Lily); Katherine Heigl (Shelley); Hedy Burress (Ruthie); Fulvio Cecere (Det. Vaughn); Daniel Cosgrove (Campbell); Johnny Whitworth (Max); Woody Jeffreys (Brian); Adam Harrington (Jason); Claude Duhamel (Gary).

CREW: Warner Bros. Presents a Village Roadshow and Dylan Sellers Production, *Valentine*. Casting: Lisa Beach. Production Designer: Stephen Geaghan. Costume Designer: Karin Nosella. Music: Don Davis. Special Effects: Dave Allison, Geoff Anderson, Jim Finn. Director of Photography: Rick Bota. Film Editor: Steve Mirkovich. Producer: Dylan Sellers. Executive Producers: Bruce Berman, Grant Rosenberg. Written by: Donna and Wayne Powers, Gretchen J. Berg, Aaron Harberts. Directed by: Jamie Blanks. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After a traumatizing event at a middle school Valentine's Day dance in 1988, a rejected outcast, Jeremy, grows up to exact revenge on a circle of adult female friends, using a false identity to do so. After the first victim, Shelley (Heigl) is murdered in 2001, her friends, Kate (Shelton), Paige (Richard), and Dorothy (Capshaw) attempt to determine the killer's real identity. Among the suspects are potential boyfriends, including the mercurial artist, Campbell (Cosgrove), and the sensitive Adam (Boreanaz). The only clue to Jeremy's identity now is his propensity towards nosebleeds.

COMMENTARY: Jamie Blanks' *Valentine* is part of the new slasher breed initiated by Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) in the late 1990s and also one of the last of this breed released before the terrorist attacks of 9/11 spun the horror film in new directions. The new slasher breed, circa 1996–2001, is renowned for two elements. The first is narrative in nature: the deliberate revival of the 1980s slasher paradigm, or tropes such as the final girl, the red herring, the organizing principle, the coup de grace, and the sting-in-the-tail/tale. And the second ingredient is tonal: a kind of tongue-in-cheek, "meta" awareness of the paradigm and its formulaic aspects that, at least theoretically, lifts the material by lieu of its edgy self-awareness.

Valentine doesn't handle either aspect of the format with a surfeit of consistency or grace. In terms of the slasher paradigm, the film's organizing principle, as suggested by the title, is St. Valentine's Day. This means that that the precipitating "*crime in the past*" occurs at a middle school Valentine's Day dance, that the killer is physically differentiated from the victim pool by his Cupid's/Cherub's mask, and that the arrows in the murderer's quiver include a literal Cupid's arrow, and gifts like Valentine's cards and candy hearts (the latter filled with maggots, rather than merely chocolate). The concern here is that the organizing principle—the film's umbrella of consistency upon which all the creative elements hang—is applied haphazardly. Not all the victims receive scary Valentines, for example.



Have they escaped Cupid's arrow? Top: Kate Davies (Marley Shelton) and Adam (David Boreanaz) believe they have escaped the clutches of a nefarious serial killer in *Valentine* (2001). Bottom, left to right: Lily (Jessica

Cauffiel), Dorothy (Jessica Capshaw), Paige (Denise Richards), and Kate (Marley Shelton) attend a funeral for a friend murdered by the Valentine's Day killer.

Still, in its application of the familiar slasher film paradigm, *Valentine* is relatively successful. The film features such old favorites (listed above) as the red herring (Jason Marquette), the Tour of the Dead, the Final Girl (Kate), and the sting-in-the-tail/tale ending. These inclusions prove that the filmmakers know their stuff, and their slasher history.

Markedly less successful than the re-use of the beloved slasher tropes, however, is *Valentine's* attempt to seem meta and self-aware. In particular, all the characters are beautiful, but cruel, shallow and sarcastic. The men are all sex-crazed assholes, and the women are all snarky to the point that one can't imagine any of the main characters even having a circle of friends, let alone maintaining a consistent circle of friends since the sixth grade. At one point, a character snaps "*well, you don't have to be bitchy*," but, as is clearly evident, all the men and women in the film are pretty bitchy. Accordingly, given the snappy but superficial dialogue, the performances are broad and two-dimensional, lacking any sense of verisimilitude or differentiation. Kate is supposed to be the point of identification for the audience, but this only works because she is mildly less reprehensible than the other protagonists. By contrast, remember in the *Scream* series how Neve Campbell's Sydney Prescott is likeable and sweet, strong and resourceful, even while able to quip ("*not in my movie!*").



Three more views of the cast of the neo-slasher film *Valentine* (2001). Top: Kate (Marley Shelton) is comforted by Adam (David Boreanaz). Center, left to right: Dorothy (Jessica Capshaw), Paige (Denise Crosby) and Kate

(Marley Shelton) consult the strange crimes surrounding Valentine's Day. Bottom: Paige (Denise Richards, left) and Kate (Marley Shelton) plan their next move.

Well, not in this movie. The characters are mean girls and mean boys, all.

Some of *Valentine's* flourishes are fun indeed, like the turbo or speed-dating sequences. Some of the kills are cheekily elaborate too. But for the most part the film isn't as smart or edgy as it seems to think it is. That's a shame, because Jamie Blanks is a good director and he helmed a powerful horror remake in this decade, *The Long Weekend* (2009), which showcases what he could achieve when working on a script with tonal consistency.

In the film's press kit, producer Dylan Sellers opined about the emotions surrounding Valentine's Day—"love and sex,"—and he noted that this movie concerns "*men and women desperately looking for love and crossing the line.*" Perhaps the most damning thing to note about *Valentine* is that it misses an opportunity to live up to that mission statement. In terms of gore, in terms of wit, in terms of characterization, and even in terms of the slasher experience, *Valentine* safely strays as far from the line as possible. Love is a genuine emotion, a willingness to be vulnerable so as to establish a meaningful connection with another human being. Not a single character in this film seems capable of that sincerity or vulnerability, or any interest in a connection that isn't merely skin deep.

Wendigo * * * *

Critical Reception

"Fessenden's latest horror yarn is a smart and scary voyage into the uncanny realm where hard realities, mind-spinning myths, and hallucinatory visions blur. Produced on a modest budget, it sports moody cinematography, razor-sharp editing, and good acting that make most of Hollywood's big-budget fakery look tame."—David Sterritt, *Christian Science Monitor*, February 15, 2002.

"However short *Wendigo* may be on blood-works, director Larry Fessenden is an expert mood-setter. Unexplained bullet holes appear all over Kim and George's cabin, the source of origin almost insignificant next to the method with which the holes are discovered. Fessenden is relentless and unapologetic when it comes to dialogue, forcing the spectator to listen to Kim's lengthy phone conversations before the woman discovers a small mound of white powder lying next to a sugar container. The entire set piece suggests a bizarre ritual at play; curiously, the sugar's brand is a Native American one. It's one of many moments that emphasize the mystique of a land now overrun by city folk and their false presumptions."—Ed Gonzalez, *Slant Magazine*, December 21, 2001.

"On its surface, *Wendigo* is easily classifiable as a supernatural horror pic with a withdrawn, solemn child and unstable father at its core. It is a scenario purposely meant to recall *The Shining* and *Poltergeist*, but it is only the beginning of what amounts to a questioning of our very conception of horror and fantasy myths. Covering the film with a panoply of textual and subtextual references to icons of cinematic horror, Greek legends and ethnic folklore, Fessenden rips a schism between existential non-belief and more diagrammatic ways of explaining the world. And in the most lyrical scene of the richly textured screenplay, George explains to Miles that all storytelling is but a way of giving meaning to the images and events around us, of distilling virtue from so much chaos and confusion."—Scott Foundas, *Variety*, February 4, 2001.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Patricia Clarkson (Kim); Jake Weber (George); Erik Per Sullivan (Miles); John Speridakos (Otis); Christopher Wynkoop (Sheriff Hale); Lloyd Oxendine (Elder); Brian Delae (Everet); Daniel Sherman (Billy); Jennifer Wilsie (Martha); Max Stratton (Brandon); Richard Stratton (Earl); James Godwin (Wendigo).

CREW: A Glass Eye Production, in association with Antidote Films presents *Wendigo*. Casting: Mary Clay Boland, Sheila Jaffe, Georgianne Walken. Costume Designer: Jill Newell. Production Designer Stephen Beatrice. Music: Michelle DiBucci. Director of Photography: Terry Stacey. Film Editor: Larry Fessenden. Producer: Jeffrey

Levy-Hinte. Executive Producer: Edward R. Pressman. Written and Directed by: Larry Fessenden. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. *Running time*: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the way to a winter house, a middle-class American family hits a deer that has been pursued onto an icy road by hunters. At the scene of the accident, there is a conflict—and immediate dislike—between “city boy” George (Weber), the family patriarch, and the red-hat wearing hunter, a “country boy.” That conflict of culture escalates over the next few days, into terrible violence. As George’s son, Miles (Per Sullivan) reckons with this dynamic, he also receives a strange gift from a Native American mystery man: a small statue of a Wendigo, a “*powerful spirit*” that can shapeshift between forms. When George is shot while out sledding with Miles, and rushed to the hospital, the wendigo appears, and goes after the hunter to satisfy its hunger.

COMMENTARY: In Larry Fessenden’s *Wendigo*, there is a short discussion of poet Robert Frost, and the way that he manipulated simple images to make them seem deep, and meaningful. The same observation is true of this offbeat yet unforgettable horror film. On one level the film concerns the red/blue divide in America, a key aspect of the national conversation (and horror film narratives) in the decade of the 2000s. Specifically, blue states were more populous, urban, and progressive, with an acceptance of many ethnicities. Red states were more rural, as well as parochial and traditional in bent. How could one house stand while divided so deeply? On a deeper level, however, the film focuses on a boy’s loss of innocence as he grapples with the loss of his father, and with the reckoning that there exist dark, inexplicable forces in the world. From a certain perspective, the film may not even feature a “wendigo” (although it is on screen several times), only the specter of death itself, as the creature is a manifestation of Miles’ fear and naiveté about the world.

It is prophetic that the ignorant, violent hunter Otis in *Wendigo* wears a bright red cap, an affectation in the late, MAGA 2010s that has become emblematic of populism, nationalism, racism, and violence. As George tells his son, “*You’ve got to be wary of people like that. They can be bad news.*” America has learned this lesson too well, after witnessing the rise of right-wing terrorism in the Trump Era. George also notes that when dealing with Otis, he tangibly feels “*the abyss*” between people like himself, and people like the hunter. Again, this abyss is, perhaps the defining crisis of the 2000s, the increasing abyss between red and blue state Americans, and their views of the world. To some, George W. Bush was an illegitimate president, the so-called “commander-in-thief,” and to others, he was nothing less than a messiah figure (at least according to 2004’s documentary, *Jesus Camp*). To the film’s credit, it doesn’t show all rednecks or country people to be ignorant monsters, and Otis possesses a legitimate motivation for his hatred of George and his family. The house where they vacation, and which they own, was once his family house (see: *Cold Creek Manor* [2003]), and he has been displaced by the wealthier, better educated, yet seemingly unaware, “elitists” that George represents. The system has benefited George’s family, at the expense of Otis’s. When historians look back at the rise of Trumpism, they will gaze at a system that failed blue collar, rural Americans, and left them out of the economic boom that lifted some, but not all boats.

Between the “blues” and the “reds,” however, there is the force of nature, the Wendigo, which seeks to maintain the balance of nature. Before the film is over, representatives of both blue states and red states are killed, since nature plays no favorites, and Miles, an innocent child, is left to reckon with the experience, and the reasons why he has lost his father over something as simple, and ultimately meaningless, as a car accident on a wintry road. He has learned that life, in some ways like the Native American’s words about the Wendigo, is not about evil. “*Nothing between Earth and sky is bad. But there are some spirits that should be feared.*” Otis isn’t evil. George isn’t evil. Even the Wendigo is not evil. But life and death are tangible forces for mortal beings, and Miles opens his eyes to that reality in the course of the film. His father tells him that “*people make up stories to make sense of the world,*” and the Wendigo is one such story, perhaps. Miles uses the myth of the Wendigo to help him interpret a world where people

of the same country—Americans all—despise each other over social and political differences. To understand and process his father's death, Miles must resort to belief in a "monster," rather than the incomprehensible truth that people, even in the 21st century, kill each other over bitter resentments, and material wealth (not to mention ridiculous conspiracy theories like QAnon). By telling the story of a boy who creates (or at least believes) in a "monster" to explain mortality, and social constructs, *Wendigo* feels like a latter-day *Phantasm* (1979), a film which was all about the adolescent experience of processing death.

As noted above, *Wendigo*'s imagery is often both powerful, and memorable. At the start of the film, a deer is chased into oncoming traffic and killed on the hood of the family car. At the climax the same fate awaits Otis (again reflecting the Wendigo's hunger for balance). He is pursued by the supernatural being, onto a road, and is killed on the hood of a car. And inside the house that is the point of contention between the city family and the man from the country (blue vs. red), there are bullet holes in the kitchen, and elsewhere, spoiling the illusion of domestic/national bliss. This image of bullet holes in the pantry, essentially, lands on the notion that the paradise and fair, tolerant world that the "blue" philosophy espouses and has faith in, is actually a world hampered by violence by those who, in some ways have been left behind, and in some ways, want no part of it. People can hide in their Martha Stewart-styled interiors, but as noted above, there are still things in the world that must be feared.

The class divide—the blue state/red state divide—is one of them.

There is talk in *Wendigo* of a town buried under the reservoir, so that people in the city can have fresh drinking water, and this detail also contributes to the film's commentary about nature unbalanced. The original inhabitants of this area had their homes destroyed, submerged, for the benefit of interlopers like George's family. Tradition was drowned, so that the upper class had a vacation playground.

Wendigo boasts some odd rhythms and shots, which makes it feel very different from other films of this decade, and that's a good thing. The film doesn't wallow in violence, or special effects, but asks us to understand a world where a "powerful spirit" balances the fates, no matter our personal politics, or beliefs. This is an underrated gem, and a reminder of how the horror genre can make its audience feel uncomfortable not through fantasy, but via reminders of reality. If anything, the film is more powerful in 2015 than it felt in 2001.

*Wishmaster 3: Beyond the Gates of Hell (DTV) ** *1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jason Connery (Professor Joel Barash/Djinn); A.J. Cook (Diana Collins); Tobias Mehler (Greg); Louise Geiss (Katie); Aaron Smolinski (Billy); Emmanuelle Vargier (Elinor); Muriel Hugue (Ms. Kauflin); John Novak (Djinn)

CREW: Artisan Entertainment, Overseas Film Group, Paquin Entertainment Group and Blue Riders Pictures presents *Wishmaster 3: Beyond the Gates of Hell*. Casting: Elizabeth Hayden-Passero, Jeffery Passero. Production Designer: Rejean Labrie. Costume Designer: Linda Madden. Director of Photography: Curtis J. Peterson. Film Editor: Marcus Manton. Special Effects: Mark Gebel, Ron Karkosa. Producers: Gary Hawsom, Giles Paquin. Executive Producers: Jeff Geoffrey, Jacqueline Kennedy. Written by: Alex Wright. Based on characters created by: Tom Atkins. Directed by: Chris Angel. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At Baxter College, Diana Collins (Cook) blames herself for the death of her parents in a car accident some years earlier, and she suffers from nightmares about it. At the same time, the college hosts a "Treasures of Ancient Persia and Egypt" exhibit, and Collins discovers the rare gem housing the Djinn, or wishmaster. The Djinn is released from his cell, and takes over the form of Diana's professor, Joel Barash (Connery). To free his army of demons, the Djinn must grant Diana, as his liberator, three

wishes. To make her “wish” three times, however, the djinn attacks her friends Katie (Geiss) and Billy (Smolinski), making her feel guilty for their pain and ultimate demise. Seeking help, Diana invokes the spirit of angel Michael to help her defeat the Djinn. The angel takes up residence in her boyfriend Greg’s (Mehler) body, and helps Diana face the djinn.

COMMENTARY: The third *Wishmaster* film (and the second entry to go direct to the home video market) is a marginal improvement over the awful second film, *Evil Never Dies* (1999), which was set largely in a prison. Franchise star Andrew Divoff is missing in action here, and the third film’s narrative is largely a regurgitation of the first film’s plot line. The big problem, however, is the scaling down of the franchise concept and visualizations. The original *Wishmaster* (1997) was a special-effects show-stopper, and featured elaborate, over-the-top rubber reality horror sequences. To top it off, the film featured guest appearances by horror franchise icons like Robert Englund, Tony Todd, and Reggie Bannister. This sequel can’t muster much of anything, a consequence of its low budget, no doubt.

Here, Jason Connery’s very polite djinn basically “tricks” victims into making wishes that come true in stupid ways. A college admission clerk wishes her whole file room would go up in flames. The djinn obliges, and she goes up in flames with it. Billy tells the wishmaster to “blow me,” and the Djinn puckers his lips ... and blows the guy into a mounted animal head, where he is impaled. These are simple murders, lacking the ingenuity, twists, and visual imagination of the 1997 film. Some of the wishes don’t make a lot of sense, either, in terms of the situation. When faced with having to make a wish or see a friend die, for instance, Diana wishes for the spirit of the angel Michael to protect her from the wishmaster.

Faced with true evil, and a legion of demon hordes taking over the Earth, why not summon Jesus Christ himself? Why pick an underling angel?

And why, after the opening scene car accident, does Diana never wish that the car accident that killed her family didn’t occur? The chain of events leading from that change might never have led her to discovering the djinn gem.

Or, why doesn’t she wish that she never found the gem?

Or, she could have wished that the Treasures of Persia exhibit never come to Baxter college, again, delaying or diverting the horror away from her and her college friends.

This film is never clever enough to ask any of those questions.

In truth, *Wishmaster 3: Beyond the Gates of Hell* plays more like an abundantly weak entry in the *Highlander* or *Terminator* franchises. The addition of a supernatural defender with a sword, the angel Michael, provides the final girl, Diana, an ally that, in some senses, reduces her agency, or heroism. The film features car chases, fires, and a battle on a rooftop, and the horror of the scenario is reduced quite a bit. A change of direction was needed, for certain, after the dreadful second film, but this new action-heavy approach may not have been the right way to go for the franchise, in part because it didn’t possess the resources to create really great “wish” set-pieces.

Despite the general low-rent nature of this sequel, *Beyond the Gates of Hell* does feature some intriguing moments. The Djinn teaches a college class, for instance, and retells the story of Helen of Troy and Paris, according to his perspective. It turns out Helen was under the sway of a Djinn, and wished for all men to love her, a wish which unleashed the Trojan War. This story suggests, at least, that the filmmakers had some imagination about their franchise villain, and his long life and impact on the human world. A story like that, though expensive to produce, would make for a fascinating Djinn film.

It’s all too easy to wish for something better, and more imaginative, than this third film in the franchise, a cheap rehash of past glories.

TIMELINE: 2002

- January 2: The Euro becomes the official legal tender of Euro Zone, or European Union countries.
- January 11: The first captured enemy combatants in the War on Terror arrive at the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp. By 2010, long after the time Bush had left office, 180 remained, still not having been afforded a trial, fair or otherwise.
- January 13: President Bush faints while watching a football game in the White House and choking on a pretzel. He is left with scrapes and bruises after falling off a sofa.
- January 29: In his State of the Union, President Bush refers to the enemies of the United States as “The Axis of Evil,” and names them as North Korea, Iran, and Iraq. This rhetorical construction hints at the U.S.’s next target in the War of Terror: Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.
- February 6: Queen Elizabeth celebrates her Golden Jubilee: 50 years on the throne of England.
- February 8: The Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City commence.
- March 11: The Homeland Security Advising System is adopted in the U.S. This system color-codes terrorism threats for easy comprehension. Red means “severe” threat. Orange means “high” threat. Yellow means “elevated” threat. Blue means “guarded,” and Green means “low” threat level.
- March 13: President Bush professes during a press conference a lack of interest in capturing Osama Bin Laden, the man behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks. *“I don’t know where Bin Laden is. You know, I just don’t spend that much time on him Kelly, to be honest with you. Truly, I am not concerned about him.”*
- May 19: The juggernaut horror TV series, *The X-Files*, ends its nine-season prime time run on Fox TV with an episode titled “The Truth.”
- July 19: WorldCom files for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy, with 107 billion dollars of assets on the line
- September 12: At a speech at the UN, President Bush warns Saddam Hussein, leader of Iraq, that military operations are unavoidable if he fails to disarm.
- September 17: President Bush, in Tennessee, states: *“There’s an old saying in Tennessee. I know it’s in Texas. Probably in Tennessee, that says fool me once, shame on you. Fool me—you can’t get fooled again.”*
- September 24: The UK publishes an “Iraq Dossier” which claims Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction, and the ability to deploy them in under an hour.
- October 2: The first terrorist attack by “The Beltway Sniper” occurs. The attacks continue for roughly another two weeks. More than seventeen people are killed, and another ten are shot in these attacks perpetrated by John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo.

October 16: The U.S. Congress passes the "Iraq Resolution," authorizing President Bush to use force against Iraq.

November 5: The first national elections since 9/11 occur. Republicans gain seats in both the House of Representatives and Senate. In Georgia, a triple amputee and Vietnam War veteran, Democrat Max Cleland, is accused of being weak on terror by his opponent, Republican Saxby Chambliss. The TV commercial for Chambliss matches images of war hero Cleland with Osama Bin Laden. Cleland loses the election.

December 4: Inspectors search Iraq, including Saddam Hussein's palaces, for evidence of WMD and find nothing. This search does not slow down the U.S. march to war.

December 12: Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld authorizes 17 techniques of "Special Interrogation" for foreign combatants. Some see these techniques as torture.

American Psycho 2: All American Girl (DTV) * ½

Cast & Crew

CAST: Mila Kunis (Rachel Newman); William Shatner (Professor Starkman); Geraint Wyn Davies (Dr. Daniels); Robin Dunne (Brian); Lindy Booth (Cassandra); Charles Officer (Keith); Jenna Perry (Young Rachel); Michael Kremko (Patrick Bateman); Kate Kelton (Clara).

CREW: Lionsgate Films presents *American Psycho 2: All American Girl*. Casting: John Buchan. Production Designer: Craig Lathrop. Costume Designer: Donna Wong. Music: Norman Orenstein. Special Visual Effects: Mr. X Inc. Jeff Scochko. Director of Photography: Vanja Cernjul. Film Editor: Mark Sanders. Producer: Ernie Barbarash. Executive Producers: Christian Halsey Solomon, Chris Hanley, Richard Hull, Michael Paseornek. Written by: Alex Sanger, Karen Craig. Based on characters created by: Bret Easton Ellis. Directed by: Morgan J. Freeman. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: When she was just a child, Rachel Newman (Kunis) encountered the serial killer Patrick Bateman, and murdered him. She was never caught or tied to the crime. Now, she is an ambitious co-ed at West Washington College, and is determined to make it to the FBI, and Quantico. To get there, however, she needs to be selected by her professor, Bobby Starkman (Shatner), as his next teaching assistant. Rachel goes to murderous lengths to murder her competition for the job. Only her psychiatrist, Dr. Daniels (Wyn-Davies), is aware that Rachel is actually a "textbook sociopath." He tries to warn Starkman about her, but is too late to help, as Rachel's ambition leads her to commit murder after murder.

COMMENTARY: This low rent sequel is entirely absent the wit, the edge, and social satire of *American Psycho*. Perhaps this isn't a big surprise, since the film's script was developed as an original property and then, late in the game, the choice was made to tag the film as a sequel to *American Psycho*. That decision to make this a franchise picture does this film no favors, at it looks even worse than it is in comparison to the brutal, transgressive original. Mila Kunis isn't bad as the sociopathic student, but the film features huge gaps in logic, and it misses opportunities to examine the often-cutthroat world of academia.

In terms of logic, the competitive Rachel leapfrogs over opponents and obstacles simply by

murder. She learns from a department administrator at her college that she is ineligible as a freshman to be Starkman's teaching assistant, her ultimate goal (and stepping-stone to the FBI). So, what does she do? She murders that administrator. The problem, of course, is that there is still a chain of command at a college, and just killing the individual doesn't mean that chain of command is gone. She is also still a freshman! Rachel's application would still have to be approved by the dean, and department chair, and others. Killing the administrator doesn't "kill" her problem, or the rule. The paperwork doesn't stop cold because the person who originated it, Gertrude in this instance, dies. Similarly, Rachel murders competitors like Brian, but there is virtually no follow-up by the college or investigation by the police. Certainly, as three students in one college class die under unusual circumstances, the police would become involved. *American Psycho 2* can't be bothered to explore this aspect of its reality.

And then there is the case of the infuriating phone call between psychologist Dr. Daniels and Professor Starkman. Dr. Daniels provides just enough information for Starkman during this conversation to make a wrong assumption, that the sociopath is his girlfriend, Cassandra, and not Rachel, thus allowing Rachel's plot to continue. Certainly, in a case like this—and on a private phone call, to boot—Starkman would want to know the precise individual interviewing to be his TA who is a psychopath. Again, the movie can't be bothered to approximate reality.

But the real disappointment with *American Psycho 2* is simply that it misses opportunities, at every turn, to satirize modern academia. The original *American Psycho* was a scathing indictment of the Reagan Era, an epoch of glittering surface, and a roiling "underneath." The greed-is-good decade was made to look, in effect, as psychotic as its representative, Patrick Bateman. The world of college admissions, professors, and grade competition is obviously not quite in the same league of hypocrisy, but it certainly possesses many intrigues that could have been illuminated. Instead of casting a light on this particular ivory tower, however, the film is content to stage not very compelling murder scenes and ignore the reality of how murders on a college campus would indeed be handled. Kunis does her best to make the film seem smart, but the performances otherwise are poorly calibrated, vacillating wildly between sincerity and camp. At one point in the drama, Rachel notes that "*studying murder brings out the best in people*," and that's a funny line about a national obsession with true crime and celebrity serial killers. It's also true that had the filmmakers studied the original *American Psycho* more closely, they may have found a way to make their sequel not just smarter, but better grounded in the reality of the film's elite setting.

Below ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“...an excruciatingly awful thriller.”—William Arnold, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, October 17, 2002.

“Much of *Below* is spent keeping the characters in the dark, often literally, about what’s going on. This is an admirable manifestation of the law in movies that the less we see of the monster/ghost/maniac, the scarier it is. Eventually, however, you do need to show us something. *Below* procrastinates that moment for too long, and when we finally do discover what’s happening, the answer is rather disappointing. It’s a case of the symptoms—the weird noises, the creepy phenomena—being more interesting than the disease.”—Eric D. Snider, *EFilmCritic.com*, June 30, 2003.

“*Below* has ambitions to be better than average, but doesn’t pull itself together and insist on realizing them.”—Roger Ebert, *Rogerebert.com*, October 18, 2002.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Matthew Davis (Odell); Bruce Greenwood (Brice); Holt McCallany (Loomis); Dexter Fletcher (Kingsley); Nick Chinlund (Chief); Olivia Williams (Claire); Scott Foley (Coors); Andrew Howard (Hoag); Christopher Fairbank (Pappy); Chuck Ellsworth (Navy Pilot); Crispin Layfield (Navy Lookout); Jonathan Hartman (Schillings).

CREW: Miramax, Dimension Films and Protozoa Pictures presents *Below*. Casting: Felicia Fasano, Daniel Hubbard, Anne McCarthy, Mary Vernieu. Production Designer: Charles D. Lee. Costume Designer: Elizabeth Waller. Special Effects: Double Negative, MetroLight Studios, New Deal Studios. Music: Graeme Revell. Director of Photography: Ian Wilson. Film Editor: Martin Hunter. Producers: Darren Aronofsky, Sue Baden-Powell. Executive Producers: Andrew Rona, Eric Watson, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. Written by: Lucas Sussman, Darren Aronofsky, David Twohy. Directed by: David Twohy. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In August of 1943, the American submarine U.S.S. *Tiger Shark* rescues three British survivors from an apparent Nazi attack on their medical ship, including a doctor, Claire (Williams). The *Tiger Shark* dodges a German vessel nearby, but soon the jittery crew must also contend with unexplained supernatural events, ones stemming from the death of the sub’s previous captain, Winters.

COMMENTARY: A ghost story set on an American submarine at sea in World War II, *Below* is a genre version of *Das Boot* (1982), exploiting both claustrophobia and interpersonal fireworks to vet its tale of the cosmic scales of justice balanced. Bereft of poor or cheesy CGI effects, like another sea-going film of the era, *Ghost Ship*, *Below* seeks and finds terror in simple, well-orchestrated moments, like it’s opening, God’s eye view of an endless, uncaring ocean. The film from *Pitch Black*’s David Twohy is actually a treatise on guilt, and could be interpreted in competing ways, perhaps. The film concerns a sub crew, who, because of a mistake and their ensuing cowardice, commit a crime, and are then haunted by that crime. Or, it is a film about the dead victims of that horrible crime, taking paranormal revenge upon their murderers. Again, the best horror movies are often those that work on parallel tracks of interpretation, and *Below*, like many efforts of the decade, nearly fits that bill.

The crux of the issue is that the sub crew responded with cowardice when faced with a crisis. They sank a British rescue ship rather than a German vessel and sought to cover it up. Their captain, an ethical man named Winters, wanted to pick up the survivors but the men who failed to identify their target correctly murdered him so their mistake wouldn’t be known. In literate fashion the film references Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and the idea of a murder that can’t be washed away, even in the

endless ocean. In the captain's cabin, a copy of *Macbeth* falls off the shelf, reminding Brice of what has occurred, and symbolizing the guilty conscience of the crew.

Either way the story of *Below* is parsed, it is the story of a haunted ship. The men are haunted either by ghosts or by their conscience, so much so that some men can't look at themselves in the mirror. Their reflections appear, at times, to be out-of-synch, or take on a life of their own, and the powerful idea visualized here is of the shadow self, the sub-conscious, that can't let go of what it has done, even while the conscious mind attempts to hide it or submerge it.

Of course, if it is the collective guilt of the crew that haunts the ship, and not actual, self-determining ghosts, then all the external signs of disaster and ruin are merely coincidences. The rudder seems to break, a tapping on the hull sounds like Morse Code (and seems to tap out the word "back,"), and then there's the hydrogen spark which burns most of the crew alive. But, given the fact that the ship was mismanaged to begin with, so much so that it misidentified a friendly ship, is it so difficult to believe, actually that these incidents are simply coincidences, ones that the crew perceives to be connected and which prove "*this submarine is haunted*," as one seaman notes?

In terms of ghosts, the rapping on the hull seems to recall an urban legend, and an episode of the old paranormal anthology *One Step Beyond* (1959–1961) called "The Haunted U-Boat." There, a skeleton was found inside the hull-plating of a Nazi sub, holding a hammer. The individual had been trapped there during the construction and launch of the sub, where he died. But, once at sea, the U-boat's position was given away by the hammer's tapping on the hull. In *Below*, not so much detail is given about the rapping on the hull, but it could be dismissed as just another coincidence. Or it could be a ghost, of course.

Whichever perspective one prefers, *Below* remains an impressive production. The cast offers an accomplished catalog of actors who have done good work time and again, both before and after the film. The movie features Bruce Greenwood, *Mind Hunter*'s Holt McCallany, Scott Foley, Zach Galifianakis, Jason Flemyng, Olivia Williams and *The X-Files*' Nick Chinlund. All inhabit their roles and bring to life, along with the period detail, a world long gone to us now, but made once more accessible and real.

Below does not feature the action or intensity of Twohy's *Pitch Black*, but this is a different kind of horror film, a moody ghost story. Accordingly, the close-quarters, the mystery occurrences, and the increasingly unhinged performances all contribute to the film's slow-burn approach to horror. Olivia Williams' Claire is one point of audience identification as someone who boards this ship without knowing its terrible history yet must share its fate. In vetting this slow-to-boil tale, Twohy often emphasizes close-ups, and other small, human touches to a degree that is successful, even if occasionally uncomfortable.

Ghost stories exist in the culture to warn the living, perhaps, that even though human lifespan is limited, human morality and human actions resonate and echo through time and carry consequences. *Below* concerns such consequences, and the film makes the idea of a "ghost" something deeper than an external monster, or a thing to be defeated. When the ghost originates from human psychology, and feelings of guilt, it cannot be easily silenced. Although it was made in 2001, and thus not accurately a post-9/11 film, *Below* nonetheless obsesses on an idea that would become trenchant and important in the War on Terror Age.

Soldiers and armies—and the nations that send them to war—bear a responsibility to act morally and ethically in that endeavor. When they don't, even a noble cause (like fighting Nazis or terrorists), loses its value and support.

Blade II ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Obviously, the director and Snipes (who's listed in the credits as both a producer and 'fight coordinator'),

along with scripter Goyer, knew what they wanted here—a big, ugly, fast, loud, vulgar, bloody movie. They got the job done, too.”—John Wooley, *Tulsa World*: “Running with the Devil,” March 22, 2002.

“Basically, the sequel replays the original movie’s set pieces with even more gore and less coherence: Once again, he is nearly drained of his own blood before coming back stronger than ever. But del Toro makes it hard to follow the most simple and repetitive plot lines.”—Michael Sragow, *The Baltimore Sun*: “Witless sequel may prove to be rather draining,” March 22, 2002.

“I could have stared at a blank screen for two hours and be less absorbed in tedium than I was while watching *Blade II*, the unnecessary sequel to the Wesley Snipes cult hit. Bleak, murky, and unredeemable, this vampire tale made me wish I were undead so I could run out into the daylight and end my misery.

Snipes plays Blade, half human, half vampire—yet he didn’t get the half that included a personality. Blade is humorless as he slays vampires. It’s a noble profession, but cracking a smile is not in the job description.

Cult director and future Oscar winner Guillermo Del Toro misplaces that touch of ingenuity and originality that mark most of his films. Though his camera is still fluid during martial art action scenes, what the films seems too familiar to spark enthusiasm.”—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Wesley Snipes (Blade); Kris Kristofferson (Whistler); Ron Perlman (Reinhardt); Leonor Varela (Nyssa); Norman Reedus (Scud); Thomas Kretschmann (Damaskinos); Luke Goss (Nomak); Matthew Schulze (Chupa); Danny John Jules (Asad); Donnie Yen (Snowman); Karel Roden (Kounen); Marit Velle Kile (Verlaine); Tony Curran (Priest); Daz Crawford (Lighthammer); Santiago Segura (Rush); Xuyen Tu Valdivia (Jigsaw); Marek Vasut (Golem). Jamie Wilson, Stuart Luis, Ladislav Mohyla, Jan Malik, Jan Revai, Tomas Bohm, Zdenek Bubak, Jan Loukota, Jan Bursa, Petr Kursalnický, Jaroslav Misek. (Reapers).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Amen Ra Films, Marvel Enterprises, Imaginary Forces, and Justin Pictures presents *Blade II*. Casting: Nancy Foy. Production Designer: Carol Spier. Costume Designer: Wendy Partridge. Special Effects: Effects Associates, Flash Barrandov, Framestore CFC, Pixel Magic, RIOT Pictures, Special Effects Unlimited, Steve Johnson’s VFX, The Image Resolution, Tippet Studio. Music: Marco Beltrami. Director of Photography: Gabriel Beristain. Film Editing: Peter Amundsen. Producers: Tomas Krejci, Patrick J. Palmer, Wesley Snipes. Executive Producers: Avi Arad, Michael DeLuca, Toby Emmerich, David S. Goyer, Lynn Harris, Stan Lee. Based on characters created by: Marv Wolfman, Gene Colan. Written by: David S. Goyer. Directed by: Guillermo del Toro. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 117 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After rescuing Whistler (Kristofferson), who has been transformed into a vampire, Blade (Snipes) is summoned to meet with the Vampire Nation, which faces a new foe, the feral, vampiric Reapers, led by Nomak (Goss). Blade takes leadership of an elite vampire squad, the Blood Pack. Although some in the group, including Reinhardt (Perlman) are trustworthy, Blade forms a bond with the daughter, Nyssa (Varela) of the vampire ruler.

COMMENTARY: Horror and action went hand in hand in the aughts, in franchises such as *Resident Evil*, *Underworld*, *Blade*, and would-be franchise *Van Helsing*. These films feature monsters like zombies, vampires and werewolves, but focus not on scares, but rather action set-pieces. Guillermo Del Toro—already an accomplished genre-blender for such efforts as historical fantasy gothics such as *The Devil’s Backbone* (2001), and *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) is up to the challenge, here, of picking up the gauntlet and deepening and broadening the world of Wesley Snipes’ Blade, the Daywalker.

Del Toro guides the best entry in the trilogy, aided and abetted by Snipes who can move, pose and fight like he just stepped out of a comic book frame. He is literally poetry in motion, and in the fight stunt scenes Snipes is incredibly impressive. He is also restrained and dignified, suggesting layers for the character, in scenes requiring more dramatic chops. The film’s final moment, with Blade leading the dying Nyssa to the last sunrise carries an emotional resonance that ends the film on a strong note.

The film’s strongest section is a sustained, multi-part action scene involving a vampire night club called the “House of Pain,” that involves Blade, Whistler, members of the Blood Pack, and also Norman

Reedus's Scud as they face off against the new, feral brand of vampires. These beasts possess the jaws of predators, and the inner mouths of *Alien*'s xenomorphs. They can also survive catastrophic body damage that leaves them fighting when most beings would already be dead. They are more memorable, as villains, than anything featured in *Blade* (1998) or the weak follow-up to this film, *Blade: Trinity*.

After The House of Pain sequence, *Blade II* relents and feels formulaic, with a betrayal by the vampires, and a confrontation with the soldier villain (Perlman), and the final boss battle. The last sunrise moment, following all the fighting, is a nice respite from the constant battles, and turns things around a bit, bringing a tragic end to the movie before a goofy coda.

Some of the CGI has dated a bit, but *Blade II* still moves with confidence and velocity. The Reapers are memorable beasts, and Wesley Snipes knew how to lead a superhero movie in real style before the actors of the MCU.

Brotherhood of the Wolf (Le Pacte des loups) * * *

Critical Reception

"This one's got it all: martial arts, political intrigue, tender romance (between Le Bihan and *Rosetta*'s Emilie Dequenne), steamy sex scenes (between Le Bihan and *Irreversible*'s Monica Bellucci), and a snapping, snarling, bloodthirsty beast."—Matt Brunson, *Creative Loafing*, October 2, 2012.

"This gory, delirious audacity is overly long at 140 minutes but is certainly never predictable."—Mark Halvorson, *Sacramento News and Review*, January 24, 2002.

"The movie, naturally, doesn't go for an ounce of credibility as a narrative—one friend described the plot perfectly when he called it 'exciting trash'—but that's a completely irrelevant point in the long run. This isn't a movie about convincing story arcs to begin with, but about the approach—and payoff—that they are able to derive as a result. And when it comes to the thrill of the visual, the imagination, the detail and the persona, *Brotherhood of the Wolf* accomplishes a great deal more than just any ordinary package."—David Keyes, *Cinemaphile*, 2002.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Samuel Le Bihan (Grégoire de Fronsac); Mark Dacascos (Mani); Jeremy Renier (Thomas D'Apcher); Vincent Cassel (Jean-François); Emilie Dequenne (Marianne); Jacques Perrin (Old Thomas D'Apcher); Monica Bellucci (Sylvia); Christian Marc (Serviteur Thomas Agé); Karin Kristrom (Bergère du Rocher); Phillipe Nahon (Jean Chastel); Virginie Darmon (La Bavarde); Hans Meyer (Marquis d'Apcher); Jean-Paul Farré (Père Georges).

CREW: Focus Features, Canal+, Davis-films, Eskwad, Natexis Banques Populaires Images, Studio Image Soficas, TF 1 Film Productions presents *Brotherhood of the Wolf*. Casting: Nathalie Cheron, Brigitte Moldon, Bernard Savin Pascaud. Production Designer: Guy-Claude Francois. Costume Designer: Dominique Borg. Special Effects: Duran Doboï, Jim Henson's Creature Shop. Music: Joseph LoDuca. Director of Photography: Dan Laustsen. Film Editors: Xavier Loutreuil, Sebastien Prangere, David Wu. Producers: Richard Grandpierre, Samuel Hadida. Story: Stephane Cabel. Written by: Stephan Cabel, Christophe Gans. Directed by: Christophe Gans. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 142 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1764, royal naturalist Fronsac (Le Bihan) and his companion, the Native American Mani (Dacascos), travel to the French countryside to investigate a series of horrific murders which have been pinned on a monster, the "Beast of Gevaudan." Once in the province, Fronsac falls for the daughter of his host, the lovely Marianne (Dequenne), and learns of a political and religious conspiracy surrounding the Beast, one involving Marianne's maimed brother, Jean-François (Cassel), as well as a local priest, and a strange, violent cult. Fronsac also learns that a spy from the Vatican, Sylvia (Bellucci), is investigating the case from a different angle. As the brutal murders by the seemingly supernatural beast continue, Fronsac closes in on the truth and his life is endangered by both man and monster.

COMMENTARY: The 2000s brought a new fusion of action and horror to cineplexes, and resulted in many films, and indeed franchises vetting this hybrid genre. *Blade*, *Resident Evil*, and *Underworld* are just a few movie series that fused the two genres into a new shape. Other films that did so included the one-off, CGI effort *Van Helsing*, which was pretty much a disaster on all fronts, and, most fascinating of all, Christopher Gans' *Brotherhood of the Wolf*. This French film met with enthusiastic audiences in the United States and led to the director's assignment to helm *Silent Hill* in 2006. Although *Brotherhood of the Wolf* is not short on violence, terror, martial arts, or action of many types, it is notable, primarily, for its cerebral and thoughtful story. In short, *Brotherhood of The Wolf* is not about a monster, the true life or historical "Beast of Gevaudan." Rather, it is about the way that a society, and a power-seeking cabal within that society, use a "monster" to control the people for political purposes.



Fronsac (Samuel Le Bihan, left) and Mani (Mark Dacascos) investigate the Beast of Gevaudan in the French action/horror film *Brotherhood of the Wolf* (2002).

A comparison to the historical currents of the 2000s is thus an inevitable aspect of understanding the film. Following the terrorist attacks of 2001, America had two new monsters to terrify people. These beasts had the names Osama Bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein. These boogeymen were considered such threats to the American way of life that America embarked on The War on Terror, against an “Axis of Evil,” a kind of wish-list of pre-emptive wars the nation’s leadership wished to wage. At the same time, new laws permitting enhanced surveillance of American citizens was pushed through when the citizenry was feeling cowed, in the Patriot Act. Simultaneously, America was subject to color-coded “Terror Alerts” about impending threats. Fear became the order of the day in a new culture dominated by it. Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden, of course, were terrible men, and criminals responsible for terrible atrocities. But the pursuit and fear of these monsters gave politicians cause and cover to pursue long-held political desires, such as building a “Unitary Executive” (a powerful Commander-in-Chief) domestically and re-shaping the Middle East and its oil wells to American benefit, internationally.

Brotherhood of the Wolf was made before the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, but released in the United States in 2002, shortly after the attacks (in February). It tells the story of a cabal of powerful aristocrats and their allies who use their own “monster,” a large lion returned from Africa, to terrorize the French countryside, and make the people turn against Rome, the King and the Pope. In particular, the Beast’s rampage is a warning to the King to respect God, or else. Again, it’s very much the same story as what America went through in the War on Terror Age.

A monster can serve a useful purpose, right?



Sylvia (Monica Bellucci), a courtesan and spy, knows all about the conspiracy at the heart of *The Brotherhood of the Wolf* (2002).

Only in this case, the monster is an innocent animal fitted (painfully) in spiked armor to seem more fearsome. The original intent of the film may have been a critique of Colonialism, as both Mani and the Beast share something in common: they are long separated from their people, their homes, and their skills/gifts are utilized by the men who conquered their land. If one chooses to read the film as a critique of Colonialism or see how it fits by serendipity the War on Terror Age, the ultimate point of the film is the same. Politics makes monsters. Or more accurately, politics—the accumulation of power—is the Beast, the real monster.

The film's second point is another one that seems ever more relevant in 21st century: the rejection of Enlightenment; or specifically, the rejection of science. Fronsac is a philosopher and naturalist, a

meticulous scientist and investigator of nature. He believes in what can be known, and what can be catalogued and studied. “*We find dragons and unicorns only in poetry*,” he asserts. He showcases how the beast, “an instrument” could be produced by man to scare the ignorant masses. He is not believed. And he is pitted in the film against a secret society that wishes to spread the word of God in any way possible, specifically through the creation of one of those dragons or unicorns, the so-called “Beast of Gévaudan.” In America in 2020, following the arrival of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the country has been fouled by just such a conflict. There are scientists who believe in facts and science, and that we live in an age of reason. Yet their scientific and public health knowledge is routinely ignored by an uneducated and, largely, religious segment of the population. These people hold up signs that read “Don’t Wear A Mask,” “God’s Got You Covered,” and the like. And then these people inevitably die from infection, or spread the infection to their compromised loved ones. The story has repeated again and again. And yet politicians encourage this flagrantly unsafe activity as “personal liberty” and push for the economy to open; their politically preferred option so that the rich can stay rich. It’s very much the same idea one finds in *Brotherhood of the Wolf*: Politics is the Beast which kills people, and religion is the way to convince the ignorant to act in a certain way (supporting those politics). Science is ignored or trashed. Evidence is scorned. Data is manipulated. Death ensues.

All this talk of politics no doubt irritates some readers, and yet as noted elsewhere in the book, “*pop culture is the politics of the 21st century*.” If movies are not examined for their points of view, they are mere amusement park experiences. And this author might as well write a book titled *Roller Coaster Rides of the 2000s*. Art—good art, anyway—universally reflects the culture and times in which it was crafted.

Fortunately, *Brotherhood of the Wolf* is no mere polemic. It is a sensual, violent, beautiful thrill-ride that carries a political or historically relevant theme. Several times throughout the film, Gans speeds up and slows the action to create a sense of mood, and tension, during fights. He never met an atmospheric effect he didn’t like, whether it be snow, or falling rain. These moments provide a palpable sense of reality and atmosphere to the film, which is important for a sense of identification. This is not a staid period piece, and Gans succeeds in making the film a visceral, unforgettable experience. At times, you feel you are actually there, in the leafy dirt pit where the Beast claims a victim or stalking the wintry small French town by night. The tactile nature of the film not only eclipses the distance between life in 1764 and our lives in 2002, it furthers the thematic connection. Very little has changed in terms of politics and religion since the Beast of Gévaudan. Monsters are still the instruments of men hoping to use their power to the utmost. The palpable nature of the locations, the fights, even the weather in that French town, all make the action ever more urgent, feel ever more relatable to us.

And there lies the film’s final, timely warning. The film ends with the aristocrats of French, some twenty years after the beast, heading for the guillotine at the hands of the angry, manipulated masses. These aristocrats called the lower class “vermin,” but after decades of manipulation, that vermin had enough of the manipulation, the lies and the vying for power.

Is the same true for 21st-century America?

Only time will tell.

Even the title reinforces this notion. *Brotherhood of the Wolf* is not the brotherhood of the Beast of Gévaudan. That monster is a lion, not a canine. Instead, the wolf is the cunning monster that prowls among powerful men, seeking new ways to lead the pack.

***Bubba Ho-Tep* ★ ★ ★ ★**

Critical Reception

“A trenchant film about getting old in America, it has a lot to say about how we condescend to the elderly—driving points home with subversive pop iconography.”—Sean Burns, *Philadelphia Weekly*, February 25,

2004.

"With Campbell's voiceover coloring much of the film, we learn that the King is actually full of introspection about the way his life ended up. There is bitterness, the aforementioned regret, a long deep pining for Priscilla, and a fighting spirit that is still glowing. Far from the 'aren't old people cute and eccentric?' tack most films take about the elderly, Coscarelli treats them with respect and dignity. *Bubba Ho-Tep* then becomes a meditation on being old mixed with enough cult film elements (mummy, memorable characters, originality) to make it one of the absolute must-sees for serious movie-goers."—Steven Horn, *IGN*, October 7, 2003.

"I'm a sucker for Don Coscarelli films—some part of me is always disappointed when I cut myself and I don't see something like yellow mustard coming out. Outside of his *Phantasm* films, this is probably Coscarelli's most significant film, and may be his best—where his original *Phantasm* film may have been a happy accident, this film is very nicely crafted (but based on someone else's work, we should remind ourselves).

Bruce Campbell is the secret (or not so secret) sauce that makes *Bubba Ho-Tep* work (not to discredit Ossie Davis, who is the other secret sauce). Campbell's Elvis as monster hunter is the role Campbell was born to play (outside of Ash, of course) and it's tragic the rumored sequel to this film never happened—this could have been a television series. Ossie Davis as JFK is the perfect foil—where Campbell is playing the King, Ossie Davis always has a look in his eye that he doesn't care if you believe who he says he is. Part of the fun here is you're forced to ask yourself from time to time if these characters really are who they claim to be, or are they just insane, or are they insane versions of the characters they claim to be, and that's before we even get to the mummified main antagonist which works well enough, but that's not why we came to this movie.

One can't help but wonder what this film might have been like if Sam Raimi hadn't been busy making *Spider-Man*, but that's a disservice to Coscarelli, who took the concept here seriously enough that it's a horror film with laughs more than it's a comic film with scares. This is one of those films that should have a much bigger following than it does—with some genuinely fine performances and some real flair."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Bruce Campbell (Elvis Presley/Sebastian Haff); Ossie Davis (Jack); Ella Joyce (The Nurse); Hedi Marnhouth (Callie); Bob Ivy (Bubba Ho-Tep); Edith Jefferson (Elderly Woman); Larry Pennell (Kemosabe); Reggie Bannister (Rest Home Administrator); Daniel Roebuck, Daniel Schweiger (Hearse Drivers); Harrison Young (Elvis's Roommate); Linda Flammer (Room Nurse); Cean Okada (Attending Nurse); Solange Morand (Iron Lung Lady); Karen Placencia (Baby).

CREW: Vitagraph Films, and Silver Sphere Corporation presents *Bubba Ho-Tep*. Casting: Jerry Whitworth. Production Designer: Daniel Vecchione. Costume Designer: Shelley Kay. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Special Effects Services, Bad Weasel Productions. Music: Bryan Tyler. Director of Photography: Adam Janeiro. Film Editors: Scott J. Gill, Donald Milne. Producers: Don Coscarelli, Jason R. Savage. Directed by: Don Coscarelli. Based on a short story by: Joe R. Lansdale. Written and Directed by: Don Coscarelli. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In a forgotten old folk's home in Mud Creek Texas, an elderly and infirm Elvis Presley (Campbell) learns that an ancient Egyptian soul-sucker—a so-called Bubba Ho-Tep—is feeding on the facility's residents. Elvis teams up with an African American man and fellow denizen named Jack (Davis), who believes that he is JFK, to defeat the monstrous mummy and end its reign of terror.

COMMENTARY: Although the visuals and special effects are low-grade and clunky, *Bubba Ho-Tep* is nonetheless a horror treasure, and both a funny and sad film at the same time. Bolstered by the greatest performance of Bruce Campbell's impressive career, the film isn't really about Elvis or monsters at all. It is about the greatest terror imaginable: the indignities of old age.

Elvis Presley is a revered figure by so many. He's a God among men for his fans, and an icon of rock-and-roll for others. He was a rich celebrity who conquered the worlds of music and film. He is also the perfect figure to headline this film because his presence makes a powerful point. If Elvis Presley can get cancer on his dick and be treated like shit in a nursing home, it can absolutely happen to any of us.

There is an old cliché that in life we can count on only two things: death and taxes. But the fact that Elvis Presley dies alone, and is mistreated, without care of consequence in his final years, speaks volumes about the universal human experience.

We are all mortal. No one lives forever. No one escapes the grim reaper. Worse, no one escapes the ravages of aging. These mortal bodies we cling to simply don't last forever, and sometimes they give way before our mind, our wits, go. And life goes by so fast. Before long, we feel whiplash at our failing faculties and ask, like characters in this film, "*where'd my youth go?*"

At this time, and as of this writing, these thoughts are not lost on this author. I wrote my first Horror Films decade book in 1999, as I was turning thirty. I write this book, the fourth in the series, at age fifty, and my goatee is no longer the red-brown shade it once was, but rather, mostly, white. And I have a bald spot. How will I look and feel when I am writing to you from the pages of *Horror Films of the 2010s*?

No one, and nothing lasts forever, and that is an unalterable fact of life that we, as human beings, must accept. If Elvis is not immune to old age, infirmity and mistreatment from the young, then what can you and I hope for? *Bubba Ho-Tep* is so affecting, and so human, perhaps, because it understands how fleeting life is, and that no one is spared the ravages of age. In one devastating scene, there is a resident death in the nursing home. Afterwards, his Purple Heart is thrown in the trash carelessly. It's so sad, because at one point, long ago, that resident was wounded in combat and fought valiantly for his country. Now, that act is long forgotten, lost to time, and there is not even an heir to cherish this accomplishment. Time takes away everything. Treasures become trash. Mementos become memories.

These observations no doubt make *Bubba Ho-Tep* sound like a dark and depressing film, but nothing is further from the truth. Instead, it's contemplative. In addition, the film is both funny and inspiring. Presley's dialogue is wonderfully picturesque and individual, and delivered with such heart and aplomb by Campbell. And while the sight of two old men, one in a wheelchair, and one using a walker, fighting a desiccated mummy is hilarious, it is also inspiring.

Elvis Presley does not go out with a whimper.

He goes out in one last heroic adventure, battling a monster and saving his friends and fellow residents. We can all wish and hope that our time on this mortal coil ends with such courage and purpose. Or, as the movie puts it, "*ask not what your rest home can do for you, but what you can do for your rest home.*" Certainly, Elvis dies with regrets (mostly about his family, as he notes), but he also dies, as he lived, a fighter ... a hero.

There is something deeper happening in *Bubba Ho-Tep* as well. The film is about two heroes of America's past that, we may feel, died for nothing. Elvis Presley lost his life from a heart attack, probably related to his addiction to drugs. JFK, the other fighter in the film, was assassinated. These icons of 1960s America died without a purpose, in particularly pointless ways, it seems. *Bubba Ho-Tep* rewrites history and gives these individuals a death of meaning and value. It's true, both men suffer the indignities of living in a terrible nursing home, and that is tough to see. But they rally, they fight, and they win their final battle. Encoded in *Bubba Ho-Tep* is therefore the idea that our heroes may not always go out as we wish, but maybe, just maybe, we don't know the "real" end of their story. Maybe we don't know the demons that Elvis did conquer, or that JFK knocked down, in the end.

On a wider scale, the film might be seen as a comment on the end of an era in politics and pop culture, represented by the presence of JFK and Elvis in that rotten nursing home. The heroes of a bygone era are forgotten, and what does America have in their stead? Who succeeded them? Do we have such larger-than-life figures like Elvis or JFK anymore? In the 2000s we have Kim Kardashian, Kanye West, Paris Hilton and Jessica Simpson, not exactly a fair trade.

Soon, these great figures will be gone from living memory, like that Purple Heart tossed in the trash, and that's a sad fact.

Bubba Ho-Tep is so sharply written and performed, so poignant in its exploration of the final years of two beloved Americans, that it's a shame to report that the execution doesn't always live up to the material. Yet the performances and the writing and the heart of this narrative render it one of the most unforgettable horror films of the 2000s.

*Children of the Corn: Revelation (DTV) **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Claudette Mink (Jamie); Kyle Cassie (Ambrister); Michael Ironside (Priest); Troy Yorke (Jerry); Michael Rogers (Stan); Taylor Hobbs (Girl); Jeffrey Ballard (Boy); Sean Smith (Abel); Crystal Lowe (Tiffany); Louise Grant (Hattie); John Destry (Cranky Man); Ron Small (Store Owner)

CREW: Creeper Films, Neo Art & Logic, Miramax, and Dimension Films present a Guy Magar Film, *Children of the Corn: Revelation*. Casting: Blair Law. Production Designer: Troy Hansen. Costume Designer: Brad Gough. Special Effects: Jamison Goei. Music: Steve Edwards. Director of Photography: Danny Nowak. Film Editor: Kirk Morris. Producers: Joel Soisson, Mike Leahy. Executive Producers: Louis Spiegler, Steve Squillante. Based on characters created by: Stephen King. Written by: S.J. Smith. Directed by Guy Magar. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 81 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A woman named Jamie (Mink) goes looking for her missing grandmother, who was evicted from the crumbling, dilapidated Hampton Arms Condominiums in Nebraska, on the edge of a cornfield. She reports the missing woman to the police, and stays at the condo, where she experiences strange phenomena, and encounters the spirits of evil children. Fortunately, a mysterious priest (Ironside), shares with her some information about a curse from the town of Gatlin.

COMMENTARY: From the very talents who brought you the less-than-stellar direct-to-video *Hellraiser* sequels of the 2000s comes a *really* less-than-stellar direct-to-video sequel to *Children of the Corn*. More so than any of the *Hellraiser* films of this decade, however, this franchise film suffers from an apparent and obvious lack of resources. An example: this sequel can't even afford a legitimate cornfield. Rather, the horror all originates from what can politely be termed a cornfield *patch* at the foot of an isolated condominium.

Seriously, the corn patch is about the size of a carpet in a not very large room.

The lack of resources is also seen in the effects, which tend to be really awful CGI. At one point, a creepy child unconvincingly extrudes CGI corn from her mouth. Another scene, involving a train and the cornfield, is also rendered poorly with computer imagery. The fire that consumes the corn field and the condos during the film's climax is also, in long shots, digitally rendered in embarrassing fashion.

But just as rotten as these special effects are, so is the screenplay. Our central character, on more than one occasion, encounters evil child specters at a convenience store. They repeat to her, again and again, one word: "Kill." She interprets this utterance to mean that they want to play the video game *House of the Dead*. (They sure as hell don't want to see the movie...). But that's just one strange oddity in a film filled with them.

The priest played by Michael Ironside appears and disappears at random, with no real rhyme or reason, and ultimately functions as no more than a voice for exposition about He Who Walks Behind the Rows. The script also doesn't explain why people in addition to Jamie can sometimes see the child spirits, and sometimes not, or why the condo sometimes is inhabited, but when Jamie first visits it, it appears evacuated. The movie also never gets around to explaining why the children can only be seen with night vision goggles in one scene when they are visible to Jamie without those goggles in the rest of the movie. It's all rather scattershot, and wholly terrible.

Still, the production design and art direction deserve some attention. Much of the movie is rendered in a golden orange/yellow light, to connect to the omnipresent power of the haunted corn ... patch. This is a clever way of making the idea of the corn field—which the movie couldn't afford—live in scenes where it is not present. In one memorable murder scene, an exotic dancer takes a bath, and a burning candlelight transforms the white porcelain of a bathtub into another avatar of the gold corn. The golden color canvas adds to the film's sense of consistency, even when the screenplay is no help in

that regard.

This is a sequel that reeks of creative and financial desperation and fails to make coherent sense on even a rudimentary level. *Children of the Corn Patch* is one entry in the franchise to avoid at all costs.

LEGACY: Even this no-budget effort couldn't keep the corn children down for long. In 2009, a TV movie reboot, *Children of the Corn*, returned the story to its original location, Gatlin. A further direct to video sequel, *Children of the Corn: Genesis*, premiered in 2011.

Dark Water (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Yoshimi Matsubarra (Hitomi Kuroki); Mirei Oguchi (Mitsuko); Asami Mizukawa (Ikuku); Fumiyo Kohinata (Kunio); Yo Tokui (Ohta); Isao Yatsu (Kamiya); Shigemitsu Ogi (Kishida); Maiko Asano (Teacher); Yukio Ikari (Young Ishimi).

CREW: Toho Company, Kadokawa Shoten Co., Nippon television Network, and ADV Films presents *Dark Water*. Production Designer: Katsumi Nakazawa. Music: Kenji Kawai, Shikao Suga. Director of Photography: Jun'ichiro Hayash. Film Editor: Nobuyuki Takahashi. Producers: Takashige Ichise, Kyle Jones. Executive Producers: John Ledford, Mark Williams. Based on the novel by: Koji Suzuki. Written by: Ken'ichi Suzuki, Yoshihiro Nakamura. Directed by: Hideo Nakata. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A single mother undergoing a contentious divorce, Yoshimi (Kuroki), rents an apartment in a run-down building near her daughter, Ikuku's (Mizukawa) kindergarten. While trying to find a job as a proofreader in the rain-soaked city, Yoshimi begins to experience visions of a young girl in a yellow slicker, who may be a ghost. As her apartment begins to be overrun by pools of water and leaks, Yoshimi learns that a girl went missing from the apartment building a year earlier. Soon, Yoshimi must make a choice about her future, and about protecting Ikuku.

COMMENTARY: Hideo Nakata's *Dark Water* is haunting paean to motherhood, and the sacrifices that mothers are called upon to make in a world run by men. That sad story is told against the backdrop of a ruined, rain-soaked world where people have stopped caring about each other, and even about children, it seems. This film was remade in 2005 as part the Hollywood J-Horror trend, and the American remake is more approachable in many ways for non-Japanese viewers. Nakata's *Dark Water*, however, functions splendidly by creating a mood of ubiquitous, uncompromising bleakness and despair. The movie's end is triumphant, however, a recognition of sacrifice by the child that the mother's sacrifice was for, but even that moment plays as bittersweet. A daughter reckons with her mother's devotion but will never again have that mother in her life.

Again, bleak is likely the best descriptor for this film.

Dark Water focuses on Yoshimi, a woman who seems to have the deck stacked against her. She once underwent psychiatric treatment, and the stigma of that treatment in Japanese society means she could lose custody of her daughter to her cruel, manipulative husband. An innocent "golden heart," Yoshimo wishes to work as a proofreader, but graphic content bothered her when she was in the job before. Again, she is a sensitive, easily disturbed person in a world that gives no quarter to such individuals. Yoshimo has demonstrated courage to leave her difficult husband, but the world doesn't see it that way. Yoshimo must support herself, get her daughter into a good school, and find a place to live, all while being derided and diminished by the society around her.

And the damn rain just never, ever stops.

So Yoshimo rents an apartment that is described as a "real steal" but which in fact is part of the

“haunted present” so many horror films of the 1990s features. These are out of the way places—psychiatric hospitals, apartment buildings, wax museums—that time has passed by, but which house the ghosts of the past. A home is—or should be—a special place, a sanctuary from the storms and tumults of work life, school, or other difficulties. But the under-assault Yoshimo finds no such respite in her apartment. There are leaks on the bathroom floor, long black hair is found clogging the tub drain, and other problems flood in. At this point, it might be appropriate to note the old saying “*when it rains, it pours.*”

In other words, when one bad thing occurs to Yoshimo, many bad things happen. This idea is literalized by the watery nature of all the breakdowns and the oppressive rain fall outside the apartment, as well as the nature of the death (and ensuing spirit) that haunts the apartment building. Oftentimes, this author has written about haunted house movies that it always bothersome that the people living in those haunted domiciles don't simply leave the premises when things go wrong. But as *Dark Water* makes plain, there is absolutely nowhere Yoshimi can go. She is trapped in Apt. 305. If she leaves, her lawyer tells her, it will adversely impact her quest to keep custody of Ikuku.

One wonders if he too would be judged poorly for moving from what is a stained, ruined slum. *Dark Water* is absolutely relentless and merciless in the way that it tightens the vise around Yoshimi. She can't move, as noted above. Her ability to care for Ikuku is hampered by her need to find a job, and at one point she gets in trouble because he is often late picking up her child after school. She has no support system, no help, and no mercy from the world that built inhuman constructs like the apartment building where, it turns out, she must dwell forever. But Yoshimo never stops loving her daughter or fighting for her daughter, even in the face of a stacked deck.

At one point, Yoshimi must make an unenviable choice. She must choose between her daughter's life, or her own happiness. The child specter that lives in the apartment building wants Yoshimo to be her mother. Forever. Yoshimo must choose an eternity absent from Ikuku, her true daughter, or Ikuku's very life. She acts in accordance with her nature, as a good mother. She gives up her daughter, to spend eternity with a resentful ghost. In making this choice, Yoshimo's story becomes one entirely about sacrifice, and the sacrifice that mothers are often called upon to make, but which, it must be said, men must make less frequently. Yoshimo has compromised happiness for herself, at home, and on her job, but she will not compromise on the well-being of her daughter.

Dark Water absolutely stacks the deck against this innocent and sweet woman, whom, so far as this author can tell, has done nothing wrong in her life except to marry the wrong man.

It is the final scene of *Dark Water* that will remain with the viewer and resonate most powerfully in the consciousness. This scene is a coda of sorts. It occurs years after the central incidents of the film. A teenage Ikuku, now a strong young, healthy woman, returns to her home of ten years earlier. She visits the apartment she shared briefly with her mother, but which she has few memories about. For a moment, she reconnects with her mother, who welcomes her home. Yoshimo is still there, still living that life with the ghost, and tells her true daughter, her beloved daughter to leave; that she must not return. But Ikuku now knows the truth.

“*My mother was here, all that time, protecting me,*” she realizes.

That is a testament to Yoshimo's sacrifice, and to the nature of mothers. We may not always realize or reckon with it, but our mothers are there, all the time, protecting us. Working through bad marriages. Taking terrible jobs. Living in places that will never feel like home. Making hard choices that put our futures first, and theirs last.

And through it all, the rain falls.

*Dog Soldiers (DTV) * * * 1/2*

CAST: Sean Pertwee (Sergeant Harry G. Wells); Kevin McKidd (Private Cooper); Emma Cleasby (Megan); Liam Cunningham (Captain Ryan); Thomas Lockyer (Corporal Bruce Campbell); Darren Morfitt (Spoon);

Chris Robson (Private Joe Kirkley); Leslie Simpson (Private Terry Milburn); Tina Landini, Craig Conway (Camper); Vilrikke's Acer (Sam the Dog); Bryn Walters, Ben Wright, Brian Claxton Payne (Werewolves).

CREW: Artisan Entertainment, Centurion, Kismet Entertainment Group, The Noel Gay Motion Picture Company, The Carousel Picture Company, in association with the Victor Film Group presents *Dog Soldiers*. Casting: Andrea Clarke, Jeremy Zimmerman. Costume Designer: Uli Simon. Production Designer: Simon Bowles. Special Effects: Image FX. Music: Mark Thomas. Director of Photography: Sam McCurdy. Film Editor: Neil Marshall. Producers: David E. Allen, Christopher Figg. Executive Producers: Vic Bateman, Romain Schroeder. Written and Directed by: Neil Marshall. M.P.A.A. Rating: R.

SYNOPSIS: In Scotland, regular British Army and Special Forces clash in the wilderness on a competitive training exercise. In the midst of the operation, however, an unknown—and brutal—hostile force kills all the Special Forces soldiers except for Captain Ryan (Cunningham), leaving the less-experienced cadre of soldiers to contend with a most surprising foe: werewolves. The soldiers take shelter in a farmhouse as rabid, vicious werewolves descend on their location. And, unknown to the soldiers, there is a mole in their midst.

COMMENTARY: The first decade of the 21st century gave the world two great, highly gendered approaches to lycanthropy, or werewolves. First, we had the female werewolf of *Ginger Snaps*, and the connection of lycanthropy to the menstrual cycle. Then came *Dog Soldiers*, a film that equates the pack mentality and the violence of werewolves, with the toxic masculinity of the post-9/11 age. In short, the violence or “killer instinct” of the canine, the werewolf in *Dog Soldiers*, is compared with the killer instinct of those who take up a life in the military, in essence killing for a living.

First, a note: I am violating my own rules by featuring *Dog Soldiers* in this book. It had no theatrical premiere in the United States, and, in fact, premiered on American television, on the Sci-Fi Channel. That makes *Dog Soldiers*, technically, a made-for-TV movie, which is not the purview of this text. However, Neil Marshall, the film's director went on to create one of the most important horror films of the decade (the all-female horror, *The Descent*), and the film was granted a theatrical release in territories all around the world. So, yes, I am breaking the rules. And yes, it is worth it, because *Dog Soldiers* is a great horror film, and a great addition to werewolf lore, specifically.

Relentless and spare, and featuring (mercifully) non-CGI werewolves, *Dog Soldiers* concerns the violence, the bloodlust that western society knowingly stokes in its men, and the way that such violence is viewed as noble, and right in the context of war. The movie begins with a comparison between Scottish special forces or (special air services) soldiers and regular army soldiers. The special forces soldiers are deemed better and more worthwhile, because of their experience and pedigree. The regular army soldiers are more like average joes. Then, the movie adds a third “pack” of soldiers to the comparison: the lycanthropes. These killers dispense with the special forces easily, work in tandem, and are absolutely brutal in their tactics. There is a hierarchy of packs, one might suggest, in the film, with the most “powerful” of the bunch (the wolves) being, simply, the most successful and brutal murderers. What makes the comparison interesting is the fact that characters move between packs. Once bitten, the soldiers become werewolves; trading up to a “higher” form of brutality and violence.

The comparison is made all the more intriguing by the movie's discussion of the line between myth and reality. Werewolves are no mere myth the soldiers find out. They are real. But what about the myths the soldiers are told by modern society? In the end, the soldiers are being asked to die in battle, for the purposes of their leader. The myth is that this act somehow ennobles them or makes that fate less determinative. In America, in the 9/11 era, this was not a small matter. There were those who would scream “support our troops” and thought that all criticism of the War on Terror was wrong and anti-patriotic, and that to show support for the troops also meant to show support for the War in Iraq, for example. Then there were those in another camp; the ones who understood that “supporting the troops” meant not sending our troops into a pre-emptive war they had no business fighting in and dying in.

Were American soldiers during this era mere props for a right-wing agenda? Is that patriotic? We

mythologize our soldiers, one might intuit, so that when they die, we don't feel so bad for having sent them into harm's way to achieve, essentially, political ends. The matter of myths vs. reality roils *Dog Soldiers* in a meaningful way. Werewolves and death are both very real to the soldiers who fight in this movie. In one scene here, the soldiers discuss British steel and the infamous Zulu siege, a way of mythologizing their past and also their "team" (the British army).

Neil Marshall is a horror film aficionado and *Dog Soldiers* also succeeds because it becomes, in short order, a very effective siege movie. In the siege horror film format, survivors hold up in a remote setting, and face wave after wave of implacable enemies. Here, the siege setting recalls *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), since the film's action is set in an isolated farmhouse. One moment with a pot of boiling water recalls a home defense strategy in Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971). And, the strategic use of a propane tank in the final battle brings back memories of another siege film, Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13*. These homages position *Dog Soldiers* within a horror film continuum, and also revivify the siege format. *Dog Soldiers* is incredibly intense and violent in ways that eclipse its predecessors.

Intriguingly, *Dog Soldiers* also mimics the beats of James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986). In both cases, a group of diverse soldiers are sent to deadly terrain. They fail in their first engagement and suffer the injury of their leader. Finally, they escape from the field of battle in a vehicle for a safe location that is not really safe at all. On a deeper level of analysis, however, *Aliens* also concerned war, and in particular, the Vietnam War conflict. The soldiers who accompanied Ripley went in with futuristic technology, and a combination of arrogance/confidence that mirrored America's confidence in that conflict. The soldiers were quickly and ruthlessly handed their hats ... err, helmets, by the opponents they had dismissed as primitives (the xenomorphs).

Dog Soldiers explores a similar dynamic, with the soldiers outmatched at every turn by the more powerful pack, the lycanthropes. Like the Colonial Marines in *Aliens*, these soldiers have been sent into a hostile terrain and forced into, essentially, a no-win scenario. The myth here is that war is something that is winnable and bestows glory; that modern technology and confidence (and rah-rah-patriotism) can eke out a win. The truth is that war brings death. Bloody, inglorious, death, to many of those who participate in it.

It's fascinating to contemplate the yin-yang energies of Marshall's two horror films of the decade: the male-driven *Dog Soldiers*, and the female-driven *The Descent*. *Dog Soldiers* is a siege film, and *The Descent*, a road-trip-gone wrong effort. Yet both horror films involve a same-sex group encountering a not-easily differentiated horde of monsters. Both also make tremendous filmic use of the dark. And both also concern a confident type of team (soldiers, or extreme cave divers) running smack-up against their own confidence in a largely unwinnable war.

The werewolves look great in *Dog Soldiers*, and the action is *Aliens*-level intense, making this horror film soldier on as anything but a dog. *The Descent* is better, but this one is still a treat.

Eight Legged Freaks * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"...this film doesn't have a leg to stand on, much less eight. But it's worth halting the flow of wisecracks for a moment to note how genuinely depressing it is. The movies *Eight Legged Freaks* pays homage to, such as 1954's *Them!* were junk. But they were vital junk, rooted in the atomic paranoia of their times. And whether their relationship to that era's temper was sincere or exploitative, at least it was palpable. Junk like *Eight Legged Freaks*, by contrast, is rooted in nothing more than the nostalgia of its creators. Attempting to re-create the lurid splendor of *Them!*, *Eight Legged Freaks* ends up as its very antithesis; call it 'Us!' Where *Them!* expressed the fear of The Bomb, 'Us!' expresses the obliviousness of a pre-9/11 America convinced that it lived outside of history, impervious to danger."—Jeff Salamon, *Austin American Statesman* "Can someone please call an exterminator? *Eight Legged Freaks* infests theaters with rampant stupidity." July 2002, page E3.

The movie begs for more goofy, tossed-off wit amid the carnage, but the screenplay credited to director Ellory Elkayem and Randy Kornfield is mostly devoid of sharp dialogue. And after a promising setup, Elkayem runs out of ideas and falls back on an endless series of arach attacks that eventually blend together into one long, boring swarm of Buick-sized spiders advancing on scores of retreating humans.”—David Germain, *Prince George Citizen*: “*Eight Legged Freaks* attack cinemas: Unfortunately the best thing about the movie is its light-hearted title” July 19, 2002 page 25.

“Decidedly goofy, *Eight Legged Freaks* is a modest horror comedy reminiscent of the campy B-movie creature flicks of yesteryear. Armed with cheesy humor and a tongue-in-cheek story, it offers light-hearted entertainment fit for a sci-fi monster movie marathon.”—Andrew Manning, *Radio Free Movie Reviews*, July 2002.

Cast & Crew

CAST: David Arquette (Chris McCormick); Kari Wuhrer (Sheriff Samantha Parker); Scott Terra (Mike Parker); Scarlett Johansson (Ashley Parker); Doug E. Doug (Harlan Griffith); Rick Overton (Deputy Pete Willis); Leon Rippey (Wade); Matt Czuchry (Bret); Jay Arlen Jones (Leon); Eileen Ryan (Gladys); Riley Smith (Randy); Matt Holwick (Larry); Jane Edith Wilson (Emma); Jack Moore (Amos); Roy Gainer (Floyd); Don Champlin (Leroy); John Christopher Storey (Mark).

CREW: Warner Bros., Village Roadshow Pictures, and NPV Entertainment present *Eight Legged Freaks*. Casting: Paula Rosenberg, April Webster. Production Designer: Charles Breen. Costume Designer: Alex Friedberg. Special Effects: Ron Golucci, Centropolis FX. Music: John Ottman. Director of Photography: John S. Bartley. Film Editor: David Siegel. Producers: Bruce Berman, Dean Devlin. Executive Producers: Roland Emmerich, William Fay, Pete Winther. Story by: Ellory Elkayem, Randy Kornfield. Written by: Jesse Alexander, Ellory Elkayem. Directed by: Ellory Elkayem. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A truck spills a radioactive barrel in a pond near the town of Prosperity, Arizona, which is experiencing an economic downturn. The spilled chemicals cause spiders to grow to giant size, and these arachnids attack the town. The human denizens, including the sheriff (Wuhrer) and Chris (Arquette) take a last stand in the local mall, as giant spiders of all varieties lay siege to it.

COMMENTARY: The sweet spot for a film like *Eight Legged Freaks* is, simply, scary but fun. The jumps and jolts need to be considerable, and the humor needs to strike a chord with an audience that is in on the joke. *Eight Legged Freaks* features an absurd but humorous premise (giant spiders attack a town), but never quite hits the “scary but fun” target the way a film like *Tremors* (1990) managed. That great movie bothered to create believable, though eccentric and funny characters, and also generated a real sense of suspense in its horror scenes. Furthermore, the graboids, though fictional, were created with practical effects, and seemed real in the context of the story. The monsters had a powerful physical presence in the film and were imposing in stature.

By comparison, *Eight Legged Freaks* is abundantly silly, but never really frightening, and the (dated) CGI effects today look ridiculous and uninspiring. The spiders here are never more real-looking than, for example, the sharks in the self-mocking *Sharknado* series of TV movies. Although CGI has improved across the decades, this film still comes at a time when they couldn’t create a sense of weight, or physicality within a scene. They seem more like cartoons inserted into the action, than a real, intimidating menace. The occasional use of fast motion (a key technique in comedy) only adds to the sense of phoniness about the titular monsters. *Eight Legged Freaks* is a fast moving and amiable effort but does not compare favorably to a fun horror comedy like *Tremors*, or *Arachnophobia* (1990) nor a serious, suspenseful “when spiders attack” movie such as *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1976).

Eight Legged Freaks does make every attempt to have fun with its material, and therefore substitutes self-reflexive jokes for actual scares. For example, the soundtrack occasionally picks up the notes of the song, “*The Itsy-Bitsy Spider*,” and on TV, the giant ant movie, *Them!* (1956) plays in the background. Given such touches, it is clear that *Eight Legged Freaks* knows its film history, and place in

it, but it isn't able to corral that knowledge into a scary film that holds together. For instance, on a science basis, the film is ridiculous. The premise, of radioactive barrels creating giant pests, ported directly from *Empire of the Ants* (1977), isn't the problem. Rather, the problem is the behavior of the spiders. The film features all different kind of spiders, including Tarantulas, orb weavers, black widows, trapdoor and jumping spiders, and in nature, these animals do not work together. Here, they join forces and launch a unified, central attack on the shopping mall in Prosperity, Arizona.

To co-opt a meme, that's not how spiders work.

Given how silly the film is, it's intriguing to note how much it reflects its time period. The joke is rife with quips about events that reflect the age of the early 2000s, including a joke "*you think a black man's vote in Florida still counts*," a reference to the contested 2000 Presidential Election. There is also the presence of a radio conspiracy theorist in the film, and post-9/11 the conspiratorial Truther Movement was born. Even the economic downturn of 2001 is weaved into the film's plot. One of the film's characters notes "*everyone in this town is having some kind of financial problem*," which is richly ironic considering that the town is actually named Prosperity, the hoped outcome of financial success. And the town people's last stand is a shopping mall.

Although the shopping mall was famously featured in Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* in 1979 as a temple to consumerism, here it is representative of the economic changes in America at the start of the 21st century. Malls were going out of business all over America during the first Bush Recession of the decade. Unemployment was climbing, eventually to 6 percent, and factors causing the downturn included 9/11, the dot-com bubble, and Enron's malfeasance. Businesses and models that had been wealth generators in previous decades were not able to sustain themselves in the new economy, and with transitions to new modes of operation, such as online shopping. Therefore, it seems significant that the last place to hold out in *Eight Legged Freaks* is the shopping mall, a symbol of an earlier (and simpler?) age of economic prosperity.

It has long been rumored, as well, that the original title of *Eight Legged Freaks* was "Arach Attack" but the title changed at the start of the War on Terror, so the movie didn't sound like "Iraq Attack." That factoid is brought up only to note that the idea of the film, an attack from outside forces, one requiring Americans to come together, even in a shopping mall, could easily be interpreted as a 9/11 message. It may be meant ironically, too, since, according to *The New York Times*, in the article "*Spend, Spend, Spend, It's the American Way*," after the terrorist attacks Bush's national calling to citizens of America was to shop, or to spend money. The President exhorted people to "*Get down to Disney World in Florida*." And "*Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed*."¹¹

The wisdom of such advice in a time of national crisis can be debated of course, but the idea behind the remark was that a strong economy was the best response to an attack designed to fundamentally change the way Americans live. So, when the characters of *Eight Legged Freaks* run to a mall to defend themselves in a last stand against an army of foreign spiders, it could be interpreted as a literal reading of Bush's advice to the nation.

Following *Eight Legged Freaks*, a whole slew of bad movies, like *Birdemic* (2012) came along, showcasing attacks by nature/animals with ludicrously bad CGI effects. Today, it is difficult to distinguish a film like *Eight Legged Freaks* from that campy school of low-budget, horror films, many of which aired on the "Syfy" (no longer Sci-Fi) Channel. The dated effects and the accent on humor in some way contribute to this reading, making this film less appreciated than it might have been, if these films hadn't become a dime a dozen in the 2010s.

Eight Legged Freaks isn't a total waste of time, but when compared to *Kingdom of the Spiders* or *Arachnophobia*, or *Tremors*, it's an itty-bitsy spider movie indeed. But, hey, it is still better than *The Giant Spider Invasion* (1975)!

"Give *FearDotCom* credit for this: It manages to bring horror to life on the Internet with greater success than any film I've yet seen. Unfortunately, beyond its initial idea that people die horribly 48 hours after logging on to the web site *feardotcom.com*, this grisly thriller doesn't have much to offer beyond some truly gruesome scenes of torture and death. In fact, the story, which centers on the investigation of those deaths, becomes confused and impenetrable midway through."—Kent L. Wolgamott, *Lincoln Journal Star*: "Grisly Internet-themed horror film fails to make connection." August 2002, page 6.

"The gist of the movie is an interminable, ineptly written detective story in which Stephen Dorff and Natascha McElhone play a police detective and a health researcher investigating some mysterious deaths. What is initially thought to be an outbreak of the Ebola virus (because the victims bleed from their eyes) is pieced together into a pattern that prompts both Mr. Dorff's and Ms. McElhone's characters to visit the Web site and risk suffering the consequences. It is painful to watch an actor as skillful as Mr. Dorff reduced to delivering flat repetitive dialogue that would make any actor look foolish, while Ms. McElhone simply walks through her role in an expressionless daze."—Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*: "A Web Site That Puts Horror in Your Head." August 3, 2002, page E 26.

"Actually, the Internet premise is intriguing. What could be killing these people? So, it's a mystery why the movie tarts it up with a mysterious white ball, dream sequences that realize the dreamer's worst fear and a superfluous homicidal maniac. By the time all that stuff gets piled on, *FearDotCom* begins to resemble one of those complicated, expensively ugly sweaters with bumps, ridges and stripes in 500 different colors."—Chris Hewitt, *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*: "Real Mystery is Why *FearDotCom* is so Uneven." August 31, 2002, page C8.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Stephen Dorff (Mike); Natascha McElhone (Terry); Stephen Rea (Alistair); Udo Kier (Polidori); Amelia Curtis (Denise); Jeffrey Combs (Styles); Nigel Terry (Turnball); Gesine Cukrowski (Jeannine); Michael Sarrazin (Frank Bryant); Jana Guttgemanns (Little girl); Anna Thalbach (Kate); Siobhan Flynn (Thana).

CREW: Warner Bros, MDP Worldwide, ApolloMedia Distribution, Fear.Com Productions Ltd., Film Fund Luxembourg, Carousel Film Company, Franchise Pictures, Milagro Films, Signature Pictures presents *FearDotCom*. Casting: Rosina Bucci, Anja Dührberg, Sue Jones. Production Designer: Jerome Latour. Special Effects: Cinesite Digital Laboratory, Das Werk, General Screen Enterprises, Green Movie Group. Music: Nicholas Pike. Director of Photography: Christian Sebaldt. Film Editor: Alan Strachan. Producer: Jean-Marc Felio, Limor and Moshe Diamant. Executive Producers: Rudy Cohen, Mark, Damon, Frank Hubner, Elie Samaha, David Saunders, Romain Schroeder, Andrew Stevens. Story by: Moshe Diamant. Written by: Josephine Coyle, Holly Payberg-Torrijia. Directed by: William Malone. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Even as a fiendish serial killer—a surgeon named Alistair Pratt (Rea)—abducts his latest victim and plans to broadcast her torture and murder live on the Internet, metropolitan detective Mike Reilly (Dorff) investigates the strange death of Dr. Polidori (Kier), author of the monograph, *The Secret Soul of the Internet*. Polidori's corpse is found in a subway station, with bloody eyes. Before long, more dead bodies are found, also having bled from the eyes and nose. At first, health inspector Terry Huston (McElhone) suspects a hemorrhagic fever, like Ebola. But then a strange clue emerges. All the victims died exactly 48 hours after viewing a specific, and gruesome web site: Fear.com. A police investigator, Denise (Curtis) visits the site, and suffers the same terrible fate. Angry, Mike visits the site too, and appears to go crazy. Looking deeper into the mystery, Terry views Fear.com and learns that it is a game site. The goal of the game is to find the site host, a beautiful woman, before 48 hours runs out. Terry investigates and finds that the woman on the site is actually long dead. Terry visits her mother and finds out that the girl, a hemophiliac, died at the hands of the serial killer, Pratt, but that her body was never recovered. Her name: Jeannine Richardson (Cukrowski). Terry seeks out Jeannine's corpse, hoping to grant her spirit rest. Unfortunately, that spirit doesn't want rest. She wants revenge.

COMMENTARY: *FearDotCom* (2002) plays out like a remake of a Japanese horror film that never was.

This forty million-dollar horror film was released to terrible reviews in the dog days of summer 2002, months before the premiere of *The Ring* (2002), and has never really seen its dreadful reputation rehabilitated. The William Malone film's antecedents or inspirations have been rightly tagged by horror scholars as *Ringu* (1998), the source material for *The Ring*—and *Kairo* (2001), which was remade in America in 2006 as *Pulse*. Like all these films, and indeed, their remakes, *FearDotCom* expresses two horror film tropes that were popular circa the 2000s.

The first involves technology. In many of these films, technology, VCRs, cell phones, or even Internet web sites, house evil supernatural entities. Technology itself is a portal or gateway to evil. Secondly, the horror films of this period eschew the American horror paradigm of the 1980s: *vices precedes slice and dice* and propose a replacement aesthetic.

In American slasher films of the Reagan Era, those who transgress by having pre-marital sex, or smoking weed, die horribly. But in the J-Horror and J-Horror Remake Epoch (again, circa the 2000s), the crime or transgression has been altered drastically. The crime now is simply *watching*. This seems a comment, contextually, about the boom of 24-hour cable news stations in the 1990s, the affordability of camcorders, and the advent of the Internet. Web sites, CNN, and cheap video cameras enabled audiences to “see” things from across the world, but respond to them as entertainment, not in a more human dimension. These movies all want to punish those who are but passive observers of human suffering.

FearDotCom is very much of this school, although it handles both modern tropes poorly. The movie's visual style is hyper and overwrought, which makes it, at times, actively unpleasant to behold, an unintentional comment, perhaps on CNN, Fox News, MSNBC? But even beyond that deficit, *FearDotCom* never overcomes several plot holes and questions of motivation. Still, *FearDotCom* makes it plain that those who watch, but do nothing to alter the events of the world are quite culpable for the atrocities of the world. When Terry texts with Jeannine, the host of the FearDotCom site—a ghost or spirit, essentially—she is told that she is “guilty.” Guilty “of what” Terry asks. “Watching,” the spirit replies. This is the core ethos of the J-Horror film genre, transposed to *FearDotCom*.

New technologies, such as the Internet offer not a place of connection or community, but rather voyeurism and sadism. For example, Pratt has a web site too, and is planning to kill his latest victim “live” on that murder site. A second season episode of *Millennium* (1996–1999) called “The Mikado” handled the same concept better in 1998, but it is clear that this concept is something the culture was grappling with at the turn of the century. If you give an “evil” web site your hits, or “clicks” are you responsible for that evil site as it grows more popular? As a voyeur, are you taking part in the atrocities, or just passively “watching?”

All those who visit the Fear.com web site soon develops Ebola-like symptoms, bleeding out of their tear ducts for watching the horror and not helping. At one point, Terry notes “*We're probably all infected,*” meaning that with the ubiquity of 21st-century mass media everybody is likely “contaminated” already. The media is all-too easy to access. The voyeuristic impulse is explored in the film through the site, which is a “*live cam death site,*” where one can find about “*death ... before it's your turn.*” *FearDotCom* thus promises its users a peek at how they will die, which it delivers. One character, Denise, dies surrounded by bugs, and at one point, the camera captures an insect literally crawling out of a desktop computer. That visual implies, simply and effectively, that the Internet is a place of pestilence and death.

Credit *FearDotCom*, too, with a sincere attempt to link the beginnings of the horror genre with the 21st-century cyber-age. The name Polidori comes from Shelley, obviously, and the entire washed-out color palette of the film suggests German Expressionism to a high degree. And yet, there is so much visual noise here—lightning flashes, quick cuts, superimposition, distortion lenses, and cockeyed angles—that the film grows increasingly unpleasant and jarring to watch. There's too much of this noise here, and it detracts from the movie's narrative and message. Additionally, it seems that the screenplay could have been developed or honed a bit more to reduce implausibility. For example, the dead girl/spirit, Jeannine—who seeks revenge for her own murder—was a hemophiliac. Female hemophiliacs are extremely rare, for one thing (uh, menstruation would be a factor, right?). But more importantly, no responsible mother of a hemophiliac would permit her adolescent daughter to play in a rusty, broken

down steel mill, as Jeannine's mother does. That's the location where the Jeannine is abducted by the serial killer, but it doesn't really make sense that Jeanine would be allowed to go there. Why would the parent of a hemophiliac send a kid out at all, let alone to a place with rusty metal and jagged corners?

Secondly, the movie goes to some lengths to establish that the Fear.com web site works in a specific manner. You log into the website, you watch, and you have 48 hours to find the body of the dead girl, or you die. That's the pattern. That's the formula. There should be no deviation. At the end of the film, the website is brought to the evil surgeon, and he watches it, thus becoming exposed. But it doesn't take 48 hours to kill him. Instead, the ghost leaps out of the Internet and kills him then and there. If this was Jeanine's intent all along, she should have just e-mailed herself as a virus to Pratt, and when he opened that virus up on his computer, she could kill him.

A more basic criticism: How does a spirit create a web site in the first place?

Character motivations in the film are not very sensible, either. It is established, early on, that if you log into the web site and play the game, you will die in exactly two days. So, when Denise dies, what does Mike do? He immediately logs on, thus marking himself for death. And then when Terry learns what Mike has done, what does she do? She immediately logs on too, starting the cycle for herself. The characters don't hesitate or weigh the options, they just leap into decisive, and indeed, suicidal action.

The great value in *FearDotCom* is, without a doubt, historical. Here's the film that beat *The Ring* to American theaters, and tried to tell, essentially, the same story: of a female spirit bent not on resting in peace but executing revenge from beyond the grave.

But in terms of specifics, *FearDotCom* is not particularly scary, in part because of the lousy, headache inducing editing, and in part because the story and characters never hold audience attention, despite the film's use of a new, 21st-century paradigm in horror storytelling.

Frailty ★ ★

Critical Reception

"As a director, Paxton seems undecided whether he is making a psychological exploration of the nature of faith, or a horror B-picture."—Alastair McKay, *Edinburgh*: "A frail and timid directorial debut, *Frailty*." August 19, 2002, page 7.

"The film has an intelligence and sophistication that belies its ax-murderer theme, including a turning away of cameras during murder scenes, and an overall restraint typical of horror filmmakers from a previous generation, such as Alfred Hitchcock and Robert Aldrich."—Jack Garner, *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*: "Paxton does double duty in the strong *Frailty*," August 12, 2002, page C3.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Bill Paxton (Dad Meiks); Matthew McConaughey (Adam Meiks); Powers Boothe (FBI Agent Wesley Doyle); Matt O'Leary (Young Fenton); Jeremy Sumpter (Young Adams); Luke Askew (Sheriff Smalls); Levi Kreis (Fenton Meiks); Derk Cheetwood (Agent Griffin Hull); Melissa Crider (Becky Meiks); Alan Davidson (Brad); Cynthia Ettinger (Cynthia Harbridge); Vincent Chase (Edward March); Gwen McGee (Operator); Edmond Scott Ritli (Angel); Rebecca Tilney (Teacher); Blake King (Eric).

CREW: Lions Gate Films and David Kirschner Productions in association with American Entertainment Co. and Cinerenta present *Frailty*. Casting: Mary Gail Artz, Barbara Cohen. Costume Designer: April Ferry. Music: Brian Tyler. Director of Photography: Bill Butler. Film Editor: Arnold Glassman. Producers: David Blocker, David Kirschner, Corey Sienega. Executive Producers: Tom Huckabee, Karen Looper, Tom Oretneberg, Michael Paseornek. Written by: Brent Hanley. Directed by: Bill Paxton. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A widower named Meiks (Paxton) reveals to his sons, Fenton (O'Leary) and Adam (Sumpter) that God has tasked him with killing demons on Earth. He claims, by touch, to be able to

determine the crimes that demons have committed. Fenton, a suspicious of his father, and does not believe him, especially when his father begins bringing home very human seeming “demons” to murder in their basement, and then bury in the rose garden out back. Years later, one of the Meiks boys, the “God’s Hand” Killer, turns himself in to the FBI and Agent Doyle (Boothe), but all is not as it seems.

COMMENTARY: Bill Paxton’s directorial debut, *Frailty*, has been the beneficiary of positive reviews in many instances over the last two decades, including by Roger Ebert, and those reviews represent one viewpoint about the film.

But not mine.

By any stretch.

To be certain, this is a well-made horror film, and one that demonstrates how, in the early 2000s, creative filmmakers attempted to breathe new life into the serial killer cinema by adding new twists. Here, of course, the God’s Hand’s Killer is such a serial killer, and one hunted by the F.B.I. But the film’s final twist is part of the reason this film fails so miserably, and more than that, is grossly irresponsible.

The problem, perhaps, is the point of identification. The film presents itself as a “coming of age” story set in 1979, as two young brothers are confronted with their father’s sudden descent into irrationality and madness, which he cloaks in religious belief. Their father (Meiks—as in the “meek”/“Meik” shall inherit the Earth), claims that God speaks to him and has told him to murder demons. He enlists his children in these murders and claims that the murders are righteous.

Fenton, a good, honest child, grapples with his father’s story and believes, quite appropriately that perhaps his father is no longer right in the head. He doesn’t want to participate in the murders, until his father says that an Angel has told him something bad about him; that he may be a demon himself. Ultimately, Fenton, rather than participate in the murder of abductees whom, as far as he can tell, are innocent, kills his own father to save them. Meanwhile, Adam and Fenton appear traumatized by their father’s activity.

But, of course, the twist here is that Daddy Meiks was telling the truth the whole time. The abductees are really demons. God is truly speaking to him. And Fenton is a demon too! And therefore, Meiks was justified in killing those demons for his religious belief, as an adult Adam is justified in killing Fenton once Fenton appears on the “kill list” from God.

At this point, the only response to this plot turn is three letters.

WTF.

In short, this film legitimizes murder based on one’s personal religious belief, the very thing that was responsible for the attacks on 9/11, though it was radical Islamist beliefs at fault there, rather than Christian belief, as in *Frailty*. Why make a movie encouraging this point of view in a time when that view is so dangerous?

Frailty presents a perfect and completely closed epistemic circle: Only Dad hears the word of God, only Dad can see the guilt of the demons, and therefore he is right in murdering them. (At least until it is learned that Adam also sees demons). And Fenton, the smart, sweet kid, is wrong for questioning his father’s beliefs and actions. He is told, repeatedly, “*You just have to accept God’s will.*”

The movie thus sanctions homicide as a result of religious belief, and faith, as interpreted through the eyes of fallible man. Alas, there are all kinds of nutcases in the world, who believe that their personal religious belief entitles them to behave in anti-social ways, and *Frailty*, from start to finish, endorses this belief system by making the father’s story legitimate, and turning Fenton—a decent, moral dissenter—into ... a demon.

And that last bit is the real issue here.

Fenton is not merely labeled “wrong” or “misguided” for his beliefs. No sympathy is granted him. No empathy is extended. He is revealed to be a demon and therefore marked for murder. Likewise, the criminals whom Meiks and Adam kill are not simply breakers of the law (a moral code created by man), they are monsters to be summarily executed. They are responsible for bad acts, it is true (including matricide), but they are revealed not simply to be human beings who have strayed from morality, but to

be demons in human form. Empathy and compassion are thus not necessary when contending with them. “*Don’t cry for her*,” Daddy Meiks tells Fenton of a demon he murders, “*she wasn’t human*.”

Again, a key cause of violence and prejudice in our 21st-century society is the inability to see “the other,” as a human being. If we don’t see immigrants as people, for example, it is easy to separate them from one another and put them, and their children, in cages. If we don’t see gay people as human, it is easy to curtail their civil rights, or not serve them in our shops. If a BLM peacefully protests, and they are labeled “a thug” by forces in power, it is easier to levy lethal force against them.

In all such instances, our beliefs that someone different is not even human is the gateway to committing violence against them. If these people are not human, they can be killed without a second thought, right?

Now, in addition to viewing others as demons, imagine you believe that you have been “*chosen by God*,” in the words of Daddy Meiks, to prosecute, outside the law, your subjective belief system.

Frailty, whether intentionally or not, takes up the position of advocating violence against those who are different, and using subjective religious belief as the justification for that crime. At one point, in the film, the children are seen watching the religious Claymation program *Davey and Goliath* (1961–1973) on TV, and the line “*God wants you decide for yourself*,” is spoken. But that viewpoint is not mirrored in the film. The humane and decent Fenton—later, again, dismissed as a demon and targeted for murder by God—does decide for himself, based on the evidence. He decides that his dad is a danger to others, and a lunatic, a zealot. But, as the film reveals later, this judgment is the result of his demonic mind, apparently.

To recap, *Frailty* endorses vigilantism (going outside the law, and committing murder) based on one’s subjective religious belief (which could simply be, let’s face it, delusion or madness), and diminishes other human beings—criminals—as not just lawbreakers, but as demons who deserve merciless death. This is, without exaggeration, the most grossly irresponsible viewpoint a horror film could adopt in the post-9/11 era because it says we each have the right to kill others in pursuit of our personal, subjective faith.

In light of this philosophy, I deem it an empty and counterproductive exercise to praise the film’s admittedly strong performances, or direction. Yes, the production values are solid, and the film features many unexpected twists. Yes, it is clever.

In the service of what?

The fact that *Frailty* is so well-made, and yet still so grossly irresponsible likely just makes the irresponsibility worse. In the end, *Frailty* explicitly notes that “*God’s will*” has been served by a brother’s murder of his own sibling, by the vigilante abductions, torture, and killing of criminals. And that Fenton deserves to die for merely questioning the idea that murder is God’s will.

Critics love to complain about the violence in the *Saw* movies, or *Hostel* movies, but then fall all over a movie like *Frailty* for its surprises, religiosity and sensitive performances, while ignoring the irresponsible, nay dangerous message it puts out in the ether.

Ghost Ship ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Blood oozes from holes in the wall. Doors slam shut by themselves. All of these unearthly goings-on lead one first mate to remark hilariously, 'This ship is (messed) up!' And so is his film. *Ghost Ship* sails into theatres just in time for Halloween. But audiences will feel more tricked than treated after watching this silly gorefest that wastes the talents of good actors. Yes, we're talking about you, Julianna Margulies (*ER*). And you, too, Gabriel Byrne (*The Usual Suspects*). While we're at it, let's throw in Ron Eldard (*ER*) and Isaiah Washington (*Clockers*), too. So much talent, so little script. Though *Ghost Ship* does offer a few—and we stress few—gotcha jolts, director Steven Beck (*Thir13en Ghosts*) is more interested in staging *Friday the 13th*-like bloody deaths than true suspense."—*Times-Colonist*, "Over-the-top gore sinks *Ghost Ship*," October 25, 2002, page A17.

"*Ghost Ship* is a quirky break from the tradition of cheesy fall horror flicks. It is not a teen slasher flick; it is a movie with a mind and a heart. But it also unleashes some very graphic, disturbing scenes, right from the start. If you are a viewer mature enough to withstand the stunning onslaught of gore without suffering nightmares, *Ghost Ship* is worthy entertainment.... The movie also has the kind of script that seems an endangered species in Hollywood: one that actually keeps you guessing."—Sue Pierman, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*: "Blood-dripping evil sets sail on viewer-worthy *Ghost Ship*," October 25, 2002, page 6E.

"When I close my eyes 18-years-later, I still see those torsos sliding down diagonally to the ground. One of the most repugnant, fascinating, remarkable openings in horror film history. But like those sliding torsos, the opening is attached to NOTHING. A good cast, including Emmy winner Julianna Margulies, Gabriel Byrne, and Karl Urban, are led astray, as is the audience. This haunted cruise is lost at sea."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Gabriel Byrne (Murphy); Julianna Margulies (Epps); Ron Eldard (Dodge); Desmond Harrington (Ferriman); Isaiah Washington (Greer); Alex Dimitriades (Santos); Karl Urban (Munder); Emily Browning (Katie); Francesca Tettondi (Francesca); Boris Brkic (Chief Stewart); Robert Ruggerio (Captain); Iain Gardner (Purser); Adam Bieshaar (First Officer).

CREW: Warner Bros, Village Roadshow Pictures, NPV entertainment, Dark Castle Entertainment, Ghost Ship Films Pty. Ltd present *Ghost Ship*. Casting: Lora Kennedy, Fiona McMaster, Tom McSweeney. Costume Designer: Margot Wilson. Production Designer: Graham Walker. Music: John Frizzell. Director of Photography: Gale Tattersall. Film Editor: Roger Barton. Producer: Gilbert Adler, Joel Silver, Robert Zemeckis. Executive Producers: Bruce Berman, Steve Richards. Story by: Mark Hanlon. Screenplay by: Mark Hanlon, John Pogue. Directed by: Steve Beck. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1962, a tragedy occurs on the cruise ship S.S. *Antonia Graza*, and the passengers and crew are killed in what appears to be a freak accident. Only a little girl, Katie (Browning), survives the bloody scene. Forty years after this incident and the disappearance of the *Antonia Graza* at sea, the salvage crew of the *Arctic Warrior* discover the long-missing cruise ship in the Bering Sea. The vessel is still carrying the gold bars she was transporting as cargo, all those years ago. As the crew of the *Arctic Warrior* preps its salvage mission, malevolent spirits begin murdering the crew. One crewmember, Epps (Margulies), comes in contact with the ghost of a little girl, Katie. The spirit of the little girl reveals the truth about the deaths on the ship; that they were no accident. Rather, another crew and ship plotted to steal the gold, and arranged the "accident" to acquire it. Worse, there is a betrayer amongst the crew of the salvage tug, one who will stop at nothing to acquire the fortune.

COMMENTARY: The supernatural horror film *Ghost Ship* opens strong, with one of the most disgusting and memorable death set-pieces of the decade. Specifically, the scene is set on board the luxury liner *Antonia Graza* in the early 1960s, as passengers and crew celebrate at a party, dancing and reveling. A metal wire cord, however, breaks free of its spool (an accident that is not so accidental, the audience learns later) and literally bisects all the partygoers, including the captain. The only survivor, a child, is left to witness the bloody, gruesome aftermath of the mass-killing. This murder scene is beautifully set-up and executed, and absolutely horrific. It is a murder that looks like an industrial accident. And the kicker, with the Captain being the last to fall apart after being bisected, is utterly terrifying, and disturbing. This is grand guignol of a degree previously unimaginable in a major release, and it must be seen to be believed. Frankly, it deserves a standing ovation. It's not merely that the scene is disgusting, it's that it is psychically disturbing. A normal human event, a party goes terribly wrong, and the brutal mode of murder—the bisection—takes an agonizingly slow time to be recognized, and fully comprehended. The characters are all dead before they even realizing something terrible happened.

Alas, the remainder of the film never quite lives up to this grand guignol opening sequence. Then again, it would be very difficult to live up to such a gruesome and unforgettable opener. The rest of the film plays as another “mystery on lost ship at sea” movie, which actually has cropped up from time-to-time in horror film history. One such film is the similarly named *Death Ship*, from 1980. That effort found a group of survivors from an accident boarding a ship that turned out to be a haunted, Nazi-torture ship from World War II. And then there was *Deep Rising* (1998), a film about another salvage crew coming across a luxury liner with treasure aboard it. Even 1999's *Viris*, about another salvage team finding a derelict ship, utilizes a similar set up to the one found in *Ghost Ship*.

Given this cohort, *Ghost Ship* doesn't distinguish itself as either the best or the worst of the bunch. That established, the film's final twist and revelation largely doesn't work, or make the preceding 90 minutes a worthy journey. There are some high points, however, like a crew member eaten by a propeller blade, but the film's approach to ghosts is such that much of the mystery of the paranormal is lost, or sacrificed.

The great value in a story like this is, largely the mystery. Mention is made in *Ghost Ship* of the *Mary Celeste*, the famous ship that was found adrift, sans its crew. Nautical history is replete with similar, creepy tales of lost ships, vanished crews, or “phantom sightings.” (Think: the Elizabeth Dane in *The Fog*). Instead of providing so much exposition and showcasing exactly what happened—albeit in stylish and effective fashion—from the first scene, *Ghost Ship* might have proven more scintillating and memorable with less information to start the journey. And the Devil character's admission at the end that he too is into salvaging, the salvaging of “souls,” plays as a bit too on the nose.

Accordingly, *Ghost Ship* is a film that would benefit from a more amorphous, generalized approach to the terror, rather than the bluntly-seen CGI apparitions and demonic personality. For a time, the audience might have wondered if the ship is alive itself and infused with evil (a thought from *Death Ship*, and also, in space, from *Event Horizon* [1997]). Instead, *Ghost Ship* feels fairly predictable for most of its run and though it features horrific death sequences (the aforementioned wire-snap multiple murder, and the propeller scene), the film only succeeds in disgusting and horrifying, not really terrifying the audience.

The choice to “land” the horror in a character who appears human, and communicates in a human way (via dialogue, etc.) tends to rob the film of any sense of ambiguity or genuine terror. Even the film's ending, with the trapped souls on the *Antonia Graze* swimming away free on the ship seems to reveal too much in a sheer visual sense. The paranormal or supernatural should be mysterious and off-kilter, not so easy to parse and understand.

Ghost Ship has a great opener, and a strong cast, and its special effects are not terrible, but the film ultimately relies too much on human terror, and too many special effects, to really create a sea mystery type horror movie of any great import.

It's not lost at sea, but it isn't clear sailing, either.

Halloween: Resurrection * *

Critical Reception

"None of the cast has much of a chance to shine in Rick Rosenthal's reprise, which has an internet entrepreneur (Busta Rhymes) renting the now derelict Myers house in which to place six student volunteers who will spend Halloween night there as the cameras roll. They get killed one by one, with Busta exclaiming at one point: 'Trick or treat, motherfucker' so as to bring everything vaguely up to date. This is the high point of the screenplay. The rest is worse. The lucky one is Jamie Lee Curtis as Laurie, who really is killed, thus making it unlikely that she'll have to go through it all again."—Derek Malcolm, *The Guardian*, October 25, 2002, Friday Edition, page 20.

"Like an aging athlete, *Halloween* is one of those past-prime horror franchises that doesn't know when to call it quits. It's slow, clumsy and everyone has seen its best moves countless times before.... Reflecting the worn-out status of the *Halloween* premise, the most interesting scenes have nothing to do with Michael or murder. Busta Rhymes is hilarious and charismatic as the scheming Internet entrepreneur behind Dangertainment.com. And director Rick Rosenthal and screenwriters Larry Brand and Sean Hood have fun spoofing over-the-top Internet entertainment and the reality-TV craze.... But with grim inevitability, *Halloween: Resurrection* always returns to what it must—the torso-slashing, head-crushing mayhem of Michael Myers. The thrill is (long) gone."—Tom Maursad, *Knight Ridder Tribune News Service: "Halloween: Resurrection,"* July 15, 2002, page 1.

"Surely even the most diehard horror fans don't expect much from the eighth installment of a slasher franchise, but the wellspring of disappointment that is *Halloween: Resurrection* runs deeper than most. Its 1998 predecessor, *Halloween H20*, bore many hallmarks of a slasher film in the post-*Scream* era (recognizable cast of fresh-faced youths, quippy dialogue, mild gore), but it did something unique in the genre by featuring *Halloween's* Final Girl Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) in the lead role. Twenty years on, Laurie is an alcoholic, PTSD-riddled mess of a woman, haunted by that fateful, violent night in Haddonfield. Michael Myers ruined her life, but she finally avenges herself and her dead friends with a swift swing of an axe at the end of *H20*, taking Michael's head and regaining her sense of self. It was as cathartic for fans as it was for Laurie, and she was afforded a sense of closure rarely given to slasher movie survivors.

In its opening minutes, *Halloween: Resurrection* undoes all of the grace that *H20* gave its heroine. Laurie made a mistake and cut off someone else's head, you see, and her guilt over this landed her in the loony bin. Somehow she builds a Rube Goldberg-ian trap on the asylum roof lest her homicidal brother come looking for her, which of course he does. Before you can say 'this is ridiculous,' Laurie Strode, iconic Final Girl, is a dead stain on the pavement of the asylum parking lot. It was as humiliating for fans as it was for Laurie.

The rest of the film centers on the Old Myers Place, which has been bought by an outfit headed up by Busta Rhymes and Tyra Banks called DangerTainment. They fill the crumbling house with cameras, pranks, and fame-hungry young folk and broadcast the hijinx to the delight of the in-film audience (and to the woe of us). Given that *Resurrection* came out in 2002, it's actually a bit prescient with regards to how ubiquitous online streaming content and reality TV would become. But it never fully engages with its iHorror trappings compellingly, and as a simple slasher movie it fails miserably. There are no scares to be found once Michael Myers returns to his childhood home and offs everyone inside. There is no style or atmosphere, and at best the characters grate. The film adds insult to injury when you realize that they've killed off a formative Final Girl and replaced her with one of the most forgettable, lethargic slasher leads of all time. While the cast list and cyber-shenanigans hint at the possibility of a campy, fun time, it never materializes, and we're left bummed out and even worse, bored. Laurie Strode deserved better, and so do we."—Stacie Ponder, horror scholar and blogger.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jamie Lee Curtis (Laurie Strode); Brad Loree (Michael Myers); Busta Rhymes (Freddie Harris); Bianca Kajlich (Sara Moyer); Sean Patrick Thomas (Rudy); Daisy McCrackin (Donna); Katee Sackhoff (Jen); Luke Kirby (Jim); Thomas Ian Nicholas (Bill); Ryan Merriman (Myles Barton); Tyra Banks (Nora); Billy Kay (Scott); Gus Lynch (Harold); Lorena Gale (Nurse Wells).

CREW: Miramax, Dimension Films and Trancas International Films present a Nightfall production of *Halloween: Resurrection*. Casting: Patrick Baca, Ross Brown, Robin Nassif, Mary West. Costume Designer: Brad Gough. Production Designer: Troy Hansen. Music: Danny Lux. Director of Photography: David Geddes. Film Editor: Robert A. Ferretti. Producer: Paul Freeman. Executive Producer: Moustapha Akkad. Based on characters

created by: Debra Hill, John Carpenter. Story by: Larry Brand. Written by: Larry Brand and Sean Hood. Directed by: Rick Rosenthal. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Suffering from “*extreme dissociative disorder*” after killing a family man dressed as murderer Michael Myers, Laurie Strode (Curtis) waits for her nemesis, the Shape, to come for her one more time at the Grace Anderson Sanitarium. One Halloween night, he does so, and their thirty-year battle comes to a violent end. The following year, a new media entertainment company called “*Dangertainment*” plans a webcast from “*America’s worst nightmare*,” the childhood home of Michael Myers. A group of Haddonfield college students go into the house, wearing head cams, hoping to become famous, unaware that Michael is actually home in Haddonfield too, and ready to stave off the invasion of his territory by the horny co-eds.

COMMENTARY: *Halloween: H20* (1998) would have seemed to put an end to any further sequels to John Carpenter’s 1978 slasher and trick or treat classic. That film ended with a triumphant Laurie Strode, played by Scream Queen Jamie Lee Curtis, decapitating Michael Myers with an axe while protecting her grown son (Josh Hartnett) from another attack by the Shape at a fancy California private school. The last act of the film saw Laurie overcome her years of trauma and alcoholism and to take down the monster—the brother—who had robbed her of her youth, happiness, and mental health. *H20* was a good, if not great, addition to the canon and at the very least it seemed to add finality to the long-running saga. One of its great virtues was this sense of finality; the fact that it put punctuation, an exclamation point, on the multi-decade saga.



Jamie, behind you! Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) is about to have her (final?) encounter with the Shape, Michael Myers (Brad Loree), in *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002).

But then, in 2002, along came *Resurrection*, a sequel that, sadly, had little artistic motivation to exist, and one which goes through contortions to even justify its existence. If *H20* was a triumphant exclamation point, *Resurrection* offers a quizzical question mark, at best. After a powerful sixteen-minute prologue featuring a despondent Laurie Strode, now a murderer incarcerated in a lunatic asylum, the film attempts to find currency in the-then current pop-culture fads of reality TV and found-footage horror movies such as *The Blair Witch Project*. The result is one of the dumbest sequels in the franchise, and an entry that is visually the least distinguished, or more aptly, the ugliest. From stunt casting that includes rapper Busta Rhymes and super model Tyra Banks, to ridiculously bad dialogue (“*Trick or treat, Motherfucker!*”) the film is likely the worst in the franchise, which is quite a feat considering the franchise already includes the convoluted *The Curse of Michael Myers* (1996). Lest we forget, that’s the film that posited Michael as some kind of genetically engineered, druid cult puppet and breeding stud.

Resurrection opens with perhaps the most bizarre and elaborate retcon ever filmed. It re-plays the finale of *H20* but adds a few scenes that alter the entire nature of that film’s narrative, all to undo Laurie’s victory over Michael. Viewers see how Michael, believed dead, escaped from the private school grounds, and dressed up a hapless EMT in his overalls and mask. Thus, when Laurie took an axe and gave “Michael’s” head a whack, she was actually killing the EMT, a father of three. This new information transforms Laurie’s triumph into an absolute nightmare, and all-but destroys the value of *H20* as a film. Now, Laurie did not overcome her decades-long nemesis, and fear of that nemesis. Instead, she was bamboozled by him.

Again.

Fans rightly objected to this retcon switcheroo, which feels like an act of creative desperation designed not for organic reasons of story or character, but to squeeze more dollars out of the franchise. Yet, contrarily, *Resurrection*’s opening act, with all its problems, is still likely the best portion of the film. The opening narration by a desolate, hopeless Laurie Strode is strangely powerful and original. A final girl has rarely been seen after the final fight and left to reckon with such a tragic mistake on her part. This Laurie has given up things like her future, and family, and committed to just one outcome: the death of Michael, whom she knows will return for her. Of course, Laurie fails again, and Michael kills her.

Creepily, she kisses him after he stabs her, and tells him “*I’ll see you in Hell.*” That line isn’t just a throwaway concept. Laurie no doubt fears she is going to Hell, after the murder of an innocent man. That final moment, despite all the bizarre screenwriting engineering to get there, is oddly powerful, poetic and even beautiful. Laurie falls away from camera slowly, in the dark, and that fall into impenetrable black, in some weird way, echoes her line about Hell, and feels like a casting down. It’s a dark but lyrical moment. The audience can’t believe its eyes, or that fate would turn this way for Laurie, and on some convoluted and strange level, it works. If one views this prologue as a stand-alone tale, a peek at an alternate universe, it ain’t bad on those terms.

But the prologue represents a connection to the audience that *Halloween Resurrection* never comes back from. Losing Laurie at roughly the fifteen-minute point, in a self-contained drama, reduces buy-in for the rest of the movie. Laurie Strode’s tragic coda feels like the main event, and everything else, an afterthought.

But sadly, the rest of the movie isn’t even a good afterthought.

In 2002, when *Resurrection* premiered, the American pop culture was changing radically, and not necessarily for the better. Television networks had come to realize that reality TV programming, featuring no writers, and no established stars, was infinitely cheaper than the production of scripted dramas or comedies. Major networks had already reduced their output of scripted programming through gimmicky TV game shows such as *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, and *The Weakest Link*. But with the advent of reality programming such as *Survivor* (2000–), *Big Brother* (2001–), *Temptation Island* (2001–), and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* (2001–) the move away from artistic programming to salacious garbage accelerated.

This era saw names like Darva Conger, and Richard Hatch ascend to the top tier of the pop culture

firmament. Part of the appeal of this programming brand was, no doubt, that anyone who got on a reality show could become a star, for at least fifteen minutes. *Resurrection* capitalizes on this unfortunate trend, featuring a group of young college students who care only about becoming rich and famous, stars of the new Web 2.0 age. That is also the desire of the minds behind Dangentainment.

While it may be considered commendable that this sequel was trying to seem edgy and hip, by the same token the characters' interest in fame and fortune makes them narcissistic, shallow and a bit cynical. Even the traditional slasher scene of a young woman disrobing to show her breasts is recast through the light of it having the exhibition be for a commercial purpose. There will be more hits on the webcast if there are more breasts flashed!

The Blair Witch Project (1999), arguably the greatest and most influential horror film of the 1990s, also forms the basis for *Halloween Resurrection's* look. Much of the footage here is grainy and unattractive, of the stereotypical "found footage" variety. This is a far cry from the classical look of John Carpenter's original, but again, the 21st century was a time for franchises to try on new looks. The problem here isn't the experimentation with a new format, but the fact that *Halloween Resurrection* uses it inconsistently, and thus draws invidious comparisons to its "found footage" moments. The remainder of the film looks like a relatively workmanlike third-person horror film, and the head-cam material simply looks amateurish by comparison. It isn't just that side-by-side the visuals look ugly, however. The found footage format also hasn't entirely been thought through from an in-universe perspective. At one point in the action, Michael Myers bursts through a mirror, while a head-cammed reality show contestant is looking into that mirror. Wouldn't the audience see the attack, and know of Michael's presence, and the murder of the contestant?

Finally, the film is undone by the fact that Busta Rhymes is the one to kill Michael. His character randomly encounters the Shape and is able to top him in person-to-person combat. It's as if *Resurrection* forgets its first fifteen-minute standalone story. There, Laurie Strode, who has been plotting her revenge on Michael for years, and orchestrated clever traps for him, fails to kill him. Therefore, one walks away from a viewing of *Resurrection* thinking that a well-prepared Laurie Strode couldn't kill her long-time nemesis, but, in a chance encounter, with no preparation, Busta Rhymes could? That idea does a disservice to the character of Laurie Strode, and the character of Michael Myers, actually.

The Halloween saga is one of the horror genre's most durable and powerful franchises. Even with Laurie's death, had the film explored some of the concepts it names check in a philosophy class (about the fact that inside all of us lurks a malevolent, shadow self), it might have worked better. Instead, this is a kind of pointless coda about Michael in retirement. He's finally killed off his sister, only to find annoying college kids squatting in his house.

Resurrection is the "get off my lawn" entry in the *Halloween* saga, with no plan about where the franchise should head next. It is the reason that Rob Zombie's *Halloween* exists.

Hellraiser: Hellseeker (DTV) ★ ★

Cast & Crew

CAST: Dean Winters (Trevor); Ashley Laurence (Kirsty Cotton Gooden); Doug Bradley (Pinhead); Rachel Hayward (Allison); Sarah-Jane Redmond (Gwen); Jody Thompson (Tawny); Kaaren de Silva (Sage); William S. Taylor (Det. Lange); Michael J. Rogers (Det. Givens); Trevor White (Bret); Ken Camroux (Ambrose); Dale Wilson (Surgeon).

CREW: Miramax and Dimension Films present *Hellraiser: Hellseeker*. Casting: Blair Law. Production Design: Troy Hansen. Costume Design: Brad Gough. Music: Steve Edwards. Special Effects: Van Hook Studios, Kevin Van Hook. Director of Photography: John Drake. Film Editor: Anthony Adler, Lisa Modzen. Producers: Mike Leahy, Ron Schmidt. Executive Producers: Jesse Berdinka, Joel Soisson. Written by: Carl Dupre and Tim Day. Directed by: Rick Bota. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Kirsty (Laurence) and her cheating, scheming husband, Trevor (Winters), are in a terrible car accident. Four months later, Trevor awakens in a hospital with gaps in his memory and the news that Kirsty's body was never located. He soon begins to suffer from strange hallucinations, and becomes embroiled in the mystery of Kirsty's disappearance, and his own behavior before the accident.

COMMENTARY: *Hellraiser: Hellseeker* depicts basically the same story that *Hellraiser: Inferno* told two years earlier, only with more fan service. As fans will remember, *Inferno* involved a detective investigating the mysterious "Engineer" and the Lament Configuration Puzzle Box, only to learn that he was already in Hell, and eternally damned to repeat the same sequence of events. In *Hellseeker*, Kirsty Cotton's husband, Trevor, embarks on his own investigation and discovers the same thing. He is already in Hell, and Kirsty has "sold" his soul to Pinhead so as to escape damnation herself.

The rerun story is not told as well this time around, despite the return of Ashley Laurence as Kirsty. It is a pleasure to see the actor again and reconnect with the character. However, Kirsty only returns for book-end appearances, and has very little screen time. It seems a waste to bring back Kirsty and Pinhead, and not feature them more prominently. Instead, Dean Winters, playing a new, and not entirely appealing character, gets the bulk of the movie's attention. It would be more rewarding for long-time watchers of the franchise had the movie adopted Kirsty's point of view, and actually depicted her story; showing her life in a bad marriage, revealing her decision to play Trevor's game, and to make the devil's bargain with Pinhead. Kirsty's return appearance here is unsatisfying because there is no real effort on the part of the film to reconnect with her, or tell her tale in more than a rudimentary, brief fashion.

Pinhead isn't treated much better. He shows up occasionally to do something "shocking" like attack with an acupuncture needle or appear as a reflection in a puddle. However, the needs and desires of Pinhead are never really examined or explored. For example, why would Pinhead agree to Kirsty's terms (five souls, in exchange for hers?). We know from previous encounters that Pinhead possesses a great fascination with Kirsty. They have, for lack of a better term, a relationship; one based on grudging respect. Based on Pinhead's words to Kirsty in *Hellbound*, it seems that he would be more eager to get his hands on her than five strangers. Does he operate solely on a quota system, where collecting more souls is of greater importance than the quality of those souls he gets to torture for eternity? One Kirsty is worth a whole lot more than petty Trevor and the other four, really. Kirsty has swindled Pinhead again.

Alas, *Hellseeker* also trades on some terrible CGI effects, particularly in the case of a two-headed detective, and some overtly on-the-nose dialogue. Pinhead's taunts and pronouncements have been reduced to such clunkers as "Is it difficult to face your demons?" and "Welcome to the worst nightmare of all ... reality." Pinhead may be wrong about that last comment, actually. The worst nightmare could just be the declining quality of this franchise as it goes through the 2000s and ekes out fewer and fewer chills and thrills for fans who stick with it through the long haul.

Irreversible ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"It's not the question of amorality that is giving this film a free ride. The obscurity of sexualized violence in order to elevate the film as art is actually what has jump started a ridiculous claim of its alleged genius. Some find the film fodder for discussions of existentialism, minute studies are done of its voyeuristic camera work and dissections of sexualized violence like a crime scene are being mass produced by critics, ad nauseam."—Moirá Sullivan, *Movie Magazine*, March 2003.

"At a time when filmmakers ... seem most concerned with not offending anyone, there's something radically appealing about a film that refuses to coddle its audience and assure them that everything's okay."—Beth

Irreversible may be known for its brutal nine-minute rape scene where the camera is trained on the female protagonist Alex (Monica Bellucci) as she is assaulted and violated as well as the scene where her male friends seek vengeance against the perpetrator which open the film. Those two scenes have seen enough spilled ink across film criticism for a lifetime and rightfully so, they're incredibly well realized, brutal scenes that are hard to shake for even the most hardened filmgoer.

The power of the film comes from the remaining hour that sees the three friends prior to their violent encounters live their lives. They go out, argue, bicker, laugh, have sex, debate and embrace each other. They seem so deeply familiar to us the audience because of their mundane-ness, the almost banality with which they exist.

Irreversible has faced controversy for not only it's seemingly excessive violence but also for its homophobic portrayal of the gay bar The Rectum which opens the film, an accusation No  has repeatedly refuted. It is part of the film, and it's a hard part of the film to look past. It is violent, uncomfortable, confusing and unnecessary. The chaos of that scene speaks to the ultimate confusion and indictment of the characters. While No  continues to make grandiose, challenging films, he also likes to poke at the sensibilities of society and most likely, without intending to, stumbled into some internalized homophobia in order to begin his film and end the narratives of these characters in the most shocking way possible.

Irreversible is a film that is controversial by design. It is meant to confuse, disorient and challenge the way we see our everyday lives if we've been lucky enough to have never encountered these situations for ourselves. It mimics the confusion, pain, fear and destabilizing effect violence has on many. Violence and its effects is a lived reality for many, *Irreversible* gets as close as any film can to making it a reality for its audience."—Alexandra West, horror scholar and author of *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity*. McFarland.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Monica Bellucci (Alex); Vincent Cassel (Marcus); Albert Dupontel (Pierre); Jo Prestia (Le Tenia); Philippe Nahon (L'homme); Stephane Drouot (Stephane); Jean-Louis Costes (Fistman); Mick Gondouin (Mick).

CREW: Muse Productions, 120 Films, Canal+, Eskwad and Nord-Ouest Films present *Irreversible*. Casting: Jacques Grant. Costume Designer: Laure Culkovic. Production Designer: Alain Juteau. Music: Thomas Bangalter. Directors of Photography: Benoit Debie, Gaspar No . Producer: Christophe Rossignon. Written and Directed by: Gaspar No . M.P.A.A. Rating: NA. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: (Told in chronological order): Alex (Bellucci) and her boyfriend, Marcus (Cassel), are deeply in love, and enjoy an afternoon together in bed. That night, they go with Alex's former boyfriend, Pierre (Albert Dupontel), to a party. Alex reveals she may be pregnant, and she confirms this fact with a pregnancy test. Because Pierre's car is broken, the trio takes the subway to the party. On the way, Alex reveals she is reading *An Experiment with Time* by John Dunne, a treatise that discusses non-linear time. At the party that night, Marcus takes drugs and has a fight with Alex over it, so she leaves. In a dark red underpass on her way home, she is viciously assaulted, raped, and beaten by a thug named Le Tenia (Prestia). Pierre and Marcus swear revenge and go in search of the rapist. They enter a gay club. Le Tenia is known for frequent spoiling for a fight, but Marcus is nearly raped himself. Defending his friend, Pierre bludgeons the wrong man to death with a fire extinguisher and both men are arrested for murder. As they are taken away, two strangers in an apartment above the club declare that *time destroys all*.

COMMENTARY: Once upon a time, if you announced you were a lover of French films, people would assume you were some kind of rarefied "elite" with a "snobby" superiority complex.

Oh really?

This perception wasn't made better during the War on Terror, when France's refusal to participate in George W. Bush's "Coalition of the Willing" resulted in an intensely stupid campaign on the part of some Americans to rename French Fries as "Freedom Fries."

However, the New French Extremity movement in that nation's cinema has, perhaps forever,

altered what it means to be a lover of French cinema. Grottesque, visceral films such as *High Tension* (2003), *Them* (2006), *Martyrs* (2008) and this entry from Gasper Noe, *Irreversible* (2002) are decorum-shattering, convention-busting, transgressive works-of-art and in a way, legitimate heirs to the Savage American Cinema of the disco decade. So, when people ask about the future of the horror film, a reasonable response might be: *look to France*.

C'est la vie?

Irreversible, an uncompromising, French film from director Gasper Noe depicts disturbing imagery not to debauch, not to humiliate, but to make one ponder human existence. In this fashion, it can be described accurately as pro-social. It is about non-linear time, and the transcendence of suffering.

Now the bad news: the way that discussion of transcendence (see: *Martyrs*) is broached is through extreme violence against a woman played by Monica Bellucci; through a lengthy, unflinching, unblinking rape scene that has, and will continue to earn the film the title of misogynistic.

To simplify the discussion, *Irreversible* might be classified as a rape-and-revenge film in the spirit of *Last House on the Left* (1972) or *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). But Noe thoroughly deconstructs the sub-genre's standard structure. So much so, in fact, so that *Irreversible* would have to be termed a revenge-and-rape film. For *Irreversible* runs in backwards order, telling its story in reverse. Because of this approach, it contends with the fall-out of bloody, murderous revenge first, and then works backwards, at least chronologically-speaking, to the brutal rape, and, at film's end, to the peaceful days before that violent assault occurred.

This revolutionary and challenging structure renders the film the *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) of rape and revenge pictures, a fact hinted at in the film by a prominently placed poster for that Kubrick film in the background of a shot. If *2001: A Space Odyssey* concerns man transcendence of his limitations at the dawn of time, and then, at the dawn of the space age *Irreversible* revolves around transcendence in terms of time. If there is no linear time, only the eternal moment of now, then the viewer must come to understand a reality in which causality is immaterial; in which cause does not precede effect.

This is a trippy brew, and in fitting with a key idea of the 2000s, that of "fate," *Irreversible* represents what might aptly be termed a God's eye view of human existence, only untethered from the linear construct we imagine as time's passage. If time is not a linear progression, but rather an "eternal now," then each and every act is a moral universe unto itself. We are judged not by "why" we do something, because motivation doesn't exist without linear time, but the fact that we do it at all. It's all pre-destined. There is no free will.

It must be noted again that the on-screen violence in *Irreversible* treads far into discomforting territory. One scene depicts a man literally smashing another man's face with a fire extinguisher. The film's central rape is egregiously disturbing because it goes on for merciless duration, for a span approaching ten minutes. This extended sexual assault raises all manner of questions and concerns for the viewer. Is the viewer being asked to be aroused by it? Horrified by it? Is the viewer asked to become numbed by it, because of its duration?

These are not light questions, and the central rape scene, which takes place in a weird subterranean Hell-scape, a red-hued subterranean tunnel, becomes something of a Rorschach test for viewers in the way they choose to interpret another person's suffering.

Let's return to that cannily placed movie poster for a moment. It features a vision of *2001's* "Star Child," and a tagline that describes the Kubrick landmark as the "*The Ultimate Trip*." This might be described as the mantra for *Irreversible*. The narrative in reverse and the horror film's final, strobe-like montage serve as our own "ultimate trip" through the "star gate" of human existence and perceptions of time. The film's opening and closing thought is that "*Time Destroys Everything*." Yet here is an alternate interpretation. *Irreversible's* point is actually that it is the human (linear) *perception* of time that destroys everything, and that if we attempt to view reality in another, non-chronological fashion, all moments will exist simultaneously. If so, there should be no fear or dread about life or death, because such things exist side-by-side, instant to instant.

The second work of art used here also serves as a touchstone for the film and elevates *Irreversible* beyond mere violent enterprise. That work is *An Experiment with Time* by J.W. Dunne (1875–1949). Published in 1927 originally, this text deals with non-linear time. Specifically, Dunne believed that all moments occur simultaneously. However, humans are not capable of seeing or detecting non-linear time, and therefore only experience flashes of insight, through dreams. In the film, the audience learns that Alex is reading Dunne's text. Additionally, she reports that she has experienced a premonitory dream, one in which she is trapped inside a "red room" and that something is torn asunder there. That red room is pretty clearly the red underpass where she is raped, and what is torn asunder (or in two) could be Alex's very life, her new baby, or maybe even Alex's sense of blissful happiness. She and Marcus will be torn asunder, for instance, by her wounds (if she dies), and by his presumed incarceration if he is sent to prison. What *Irreversible* asks audiences to understand, finally, is that, since every moment exists simultaneously, side-by-side, all of time is pre-ordained. If our very births and our deaths, our sadness and our happiness, co-exist right now, and we can detect these moments through precognition, why should we choose to be bad to one another? Why do we, in the words of Pierre behave "*like an animal*." "*Even animals*," he insists, "*don't seek revenge*." And yet, Pierre, finally, is the one who succumbs to violence and bludgeons the wrong man to death. This impulsive brutality seems to run counter to his character as *he* understands it (a man who can't stop thinking long enough to act on impulse), and reveals his true nature as, indeed, impulsive and savage. Can Pierre blame his bloody behavior on Alex's rape? Or is it a crucial part of his gestalt, of his very soul, and outside of free will?

Another scene in *Irreversible* features two men sitting together in a squalid apartment discussing the things they have done "wrong." One man confesses a grotesque crime, and the other man soothes him by establishing that there are "*no bad deeds ... just deeds*." This fact is true *only* if all moments exist simultaneously, and are not bound by time's arrow, or time's direction; if cause does not precede effect. Instead, each act becomes an expression of a kind of eternal, *essential* "self," independent of causality and motivation. Violence is not a response to action, but an acting out of an essential quality of the soul itself. Late in *Irreversible*, one character also states: "*you want to explain everything, but you can't*."

This comment is an admission that people don't always know why they act poorly, or violently, against other people. Instead, if the universe is pre-ordained and unalterable—or *irreversible*—then there is no easily understandable reason why horrible things occur, except that *it's the way of life itself*. Some people have viewed the film as anti-gay, for instance, because the brutal rapist, Le Tenia, frequents a very rough gay club called the Rectum. Why would an ostensibly gay man rape a woman? Why does his act make any sense at all?

Well, to quote the film, you want to explain everything, but you can't. The act was pre-ordained. It was destiny that Le Tenia and Alex would end up in that red tunnel together, and that he would rape her. It was meant, for some reason, to occur. Perhaps the essence of Le Tenia's moral character—*outside of the confines of time and cause and effect*—is one of brutality and sadism. Besides, one might suggest rape is about power, not about an expression of sexual desire.

Irreversible embodies Dunne's ideas about non-linear time through several unique applications of film grammar. First, there's the reversed flow of time, told in long, sustained passages (with few or no cuts). Each passage feels like a distinct and separate moment of time, connected tenuously to what comes next, and what comes before. And secondly, the camera is untethered from gravity itself as the film opens and "revenge" is meted, swaying and swooping, unanchored. For the first several moments, this technique is disorienting, but soon the audience understands that the untethered camera expresses the idea of spinning through space, without the natural laws we take for granted. The film's camerawork reveals that the world's nature is not as we perceive it.

The third work of art to consider in *Irreversible* is Beethoven's (1770–1827) *7th Symphony*. It is heard on the soundtrack at crucial moments and is a composition notorious for its sense of spontaneity. Some, in fact, call the *7th Symphony* an embodiment of *madness*. Spontaneity and madness, together. Is that another representation of human existence? There can be no spontaneity (or rage, impulse, or madness), if the shape and dimension of time is already diagrammed. The *7th Symphony* supports our wrong-headed idea that time is linear, and that we are spontaneous characters, susceptible to the whims

of cause and effect.

Kubrick and the ultimate trip. Dunne and non-linear time. Beethoven and spontaneity and madness. These are the touchstones of Gasper Noé's *Irreversible*. Everybody discusses the horrific, extended rape scene, or the brutal bashing in of a victim's face. But these three works of art showcase how the film is an elevated discussion of human nature. Dunne lays the groundwork for an alternative way of understanding our lives, and reality. The film juxtaposes Beethoven's piece of spontaneity with the idea that there is no spontaneity (though, perhaps, madness). And at *Irreversible*'s conclusion, the camera lingers on that poster of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, asking us to consider "the trip" of this film, and also, deliberately, the meaning of the Star Child. The film then ends with a strobing effect, a bizarre montage of indistinct images, and a final fade-to-black. If time has destroyed everything, as the two strangers suggest, has it also, actually, destroyed the film itself? Another reading could be that the reverse momentum of the film actually taking the audience backwards all the way to the Big Bang and the moment of creation—and therefore time—itself? It's a fascinating idea to ponder. When the universe was born, were all possibilities, all presents and futures, written in that very instant? Right down to Alex's rape? Right down to Pierre's act of murder? Director Gasper Noé's *Irreversible* tries to push us to the next (possible) level of human understanding of existence.

Again, to imagine that a rape and revenge horror movie could chart this path is pretty amazing, and Noé's use of Kubrick, Dunne and Beethoven reminds the audience that no matter the violence on-screen, the motive behind it is high-minded.

Jason X ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"A movie about Jason Voorhees in space doesn't have any right to be this entertaining. In the 10th installment of *Friday the 13th*, we travel to the year 2455 where a group of students on a field trip discover the cryogenically frozen remains of Jason and decide to revive him. It shouldn't be any surprise that this all goes terribly wrong and what follows is a ridiculous scenario in which Jason massacres his way through a spaceship before later undergoing a transformation into a hulking cyborg. One of the highlights includes a head dunked in liquid nitrogen that is then smashed to pieces on a table."—*Newstex Finance and Accounting Blogs*, "9 Cheesy Horror Movies That You Have to See," June 29, 2016.

"Isaac offers an imaginative climax after the half-destroyed monster metamorphoses into an Uber-Jason who resembles Robocop. And splatter fans will groove on the Crystal Lake jokes, including a final shot that paves the way for *Jason XI*."—Malcolm Johnson, *Hartford Courant*: "Friday the 13th in Space—Unkillable Killer Zooms to the Future in *Jason X*." April 26, 2002, page D7.

"*The Friday the 13th* series has always been a lowbrow pleasure, usually having its best moments when it embraces Jason as a throwback to Universal Monsters rather than the kin of Michael Myers—Jason's a fun monster but often a dull slasher.

Jason X embraces the Universal Monster aspects of Jason, along with some goofy science fiction (along with a visit to *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s holodeck which provides the film with its finest moment). There is a certain 'gee whiz, hey, let's jump the shark!' vibe in the film that doesn't hurt it. Its infamous moment of 'icebreaking' delivered a classic (and novel) slasher movie death, which at this point in the history of horror films was certainly getting to be a challenge since nearly everything has been done that conceivably could be done to the human body (or one would hope) in these films. Making Jason the Six Million Dollar Slasher in this film is a case of ... well, why not? The folks behind this film gave us some good old fashioned Jason action in a new setting and it almost succeeds in clearing the palate of the bad taste left from *Jason Goes to Hell*, a film so bad they spent nearly a decade trying to figure out what to do next. *Jason X* is better than *Jason Goes to Hell*—which is not exactly praise, but it's a fun Jason film—that's usually good enough. But part of me wishes they'd left Jason on the holodeck for more of the movie."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster and Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kane Hodder (Jason Voorhees); Lexa Doig (Rowan); David Cronenberg (Dr. Wimmer); Jonathan Potts (Professor Lowe); Lisa Ryder (Kay-Em 14); Peter Mensah (Sgt. Brodski); Jeff Geddis (Soldier #1); Marcus Parlio (Sgt. Marcus); Dov Tiefenbach (Azrael); Chuck Campbell (Tsunaron); Melyssa Ade (Janessa); Boyd Banks (Fat Lou); Barna Moricz (Kicker); Dylan Bierk (Briggs); Todd Farmer (Dallas).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Crystal Lake Entertainment, Friday X Productions, Sean S. Cunningham Films presents *Jason X*. Casting: Robin Cook. Production Design: John Dondertman. Costume Designer: Maxyne Baker. Special Effects: Global Effects Inc., Toybox. Music: Harry Manfredini. Director of Photography: Derick Underschultz. Film Editor: David Handman. Producers: Noel Cunningham. Executive Producers: Sean S. Cunningham, James Isaac. Based on characters created by: Victor Miller. Written by: Todd Farmer. Directed by: Jim Isaac. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 2010, at the Crystal Lake Research Facility, Jason Voorhees (Hodder) escapes captivity. A resourceful scientist, Rowan (Doig), manages to freeze him in a cryogenic unit, but not before being wounded and succumbing to the cryo-gases as well. Four hundred years later, in 2455, a class of students explores the now abandoned, environmentally ravaged planet Earth. There, students uncover Jason and Rowan at the ancient facility, and bring back the frozen life-forms to their ship. Professor Lowe (Potts), their teacher, sees an opportunity to make a profit off of Jason's corpse. When Rowan is awakened, she expresses concern about Jason, but Dr. Lowe assures her he is very dead. But Jason has never stayed dead for long, and this time is no exception. Now it's Jason Voorhees vs. the best technology the 25th century can offer, which includes holodecks and androids.

COMMENTARY: *Jason X* is a huge departure for the slasher series because it is set in the distant future and in outer space. The film is also one of the lowest-grossing entries in the sturdy franchise, which means, perhaps, that audiences didn't take too well to its many departures from the norm. But *Jason X* has its charms. It's an utterly ridiculous movie that tosses *Friday the 13th*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994) and *Aliens* (1986) into a blender and comes up with one weird, inventive horror film. The movie possesses a sense of joy about itself, and its own ridiculousness. The vibe is pure, anarchic glee. While it's true that the film is never overtly scary or suspenseful, *Jason X* is undeniably fun, gross, and ingenious. A few of the kills are downright inspired in conception and execution, especially the one involving a giant corkscrew, and another involving a doctor's face dipped in liquid nitrogen.

Yet one particular moment in the film strides above all the rest, and deserves absolute, adoring respect. Late in the film, a cyborg version of Jason stumbles into a holodeck version of Camp Crystal Lake and encounters two nubile young women (actually computer-generated distractions) who proclaim loudly their love for premarital sex. Reverting to form, Jason stops to kill them, but the trick is that the avatars are designed just for that purpose, to appeal to his draconian (or perhaps Victorian) sense of vice-precedes slice-or-dice morality. Thus, the *Friday the 13th* franchise finally acknowledges on screen in true post-modern fashion its enduring subtext. You play ... you pay. You fuck ... you're out of luck. Lest one forget, the original franchise came about as the Reagan Revolution unfolded in America, and a tide of conservatism swept the country. These films, though despised by conservatives are very much about that draconian, black-and-white world view. If you engage in premarital sex or smoke weed.... Jason's going to kill you. But back to *Jason X*. Any film that is willing to wink at the entire saga's central conceit is seriously deserving of some love and respect.

Despite their virtues, the *Friday the 13th* movies are repetitive in the extreme. Most of the films involve a lumbering killer (either Jason or his Mom) knocking off camp counselors under cover of approaching storm at scenic Camp Crystal Lake. There's the scene involving pre-marital sex and death. Of smoking weed and death. Of skinny-dipping and death. And then there is the tour of the dead, in which Jason has propped up all the bodies, so the Final Girl can run through them all like a fun house carnival. Then comes the coup de grace in which Jason apparently dies, and some twist-in-the-tail/tale

that promises yet another sequel.

Later movies throw in variations of the format, like adding a Carrie knock-off, or visiting Manhattan, but *Jason X*, perhaps, is the first of the franchise to turn its eyes towards wholesale assimilation of science fiction tropes. Not surprisingly, *Star Trek* is a major inspiration, particularly *The Next Generation*. A major character, for instance, is a sentient android named Key-Em 14 (Lisa Ryder), who adapts to different environments, likes to role-play and is, apparently, fully functional just like Mr. Data (Brent Spiner). Also appropriated from the *Next Generation* is the conceit of the holodeck, a virtual reality chamber where reality can be re-molded to different settings based on user input. As is the case on the Enterprise D, the space crew in *Jason X* uses the holodeck for training and recreational purposes.

The *Alien* film series is also a major influence here. In particular, Rowan (Lexa Doig), plays basically the same role in *Jason X* as Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) does in *Aliens* (1986). She is awakened from a long cryo-sleep to contend with a threat that only she has direct, first-person information about. In *Aliens*, that threat is the xenomorph from LV-426. In *Jason X*, of course, it is Mr. Voorhees. Similarly, both Rowan and Ripley continually act as a brand of Cassandra figure. They warn all those around them about what will happen once the threat is encountered, but they are ignored until it is too late. Similarly, Rowan is surrounded by other figures you may recognize from *Aliens*. That film also had an android, named Bishop (Lance Henriksen), of course. But there's Sgt. Brodski (Peter Mensah) in *Jason X*, a dedicated fighter and protector who makes a good stand-in for Michael Biehn's Hicks. And then there's the Carter Burke surrogate, an avaricious teacher more interested in profit than safety: greedy Professor Lowe (Jonathan Potts). These qualities and characters might be decried as cheap or obvious shots at more popular film/TV franchises, and yet one can't really quibble with how *Jason X* utilizes them. It's not a movie's subject matter that counts, remember, but the ways in which a movie explores that subject matter. In this case, the futuristic trappings provide two great moments in *Friday the 13th* history.

The first such moment involves sick bay Nanites or nano-bots, another idea familiar from the *Trek* universe and the third season *TNG* episode "Evolution." These tiny machines give Jason a dramatic visual and technological upgrade. There's a great moment of Frankenstein-like portentousness here as the Nanites swarm down on Jason's corpse and bring it back to life in this new, flesh-and-steel form. Secondly, there's that holodeck moment mentioned above. The survivors of the spaceship realize that Jason can't resist temptation. He sees gorgeous, nubile camp counselors ... and ... must ... kill them. The urge is too strong for him to overcome. Frankly, this is a perfect movie moment, an inspiration that could emerge, finally, only from synthesizing so many disparate creative sources, and from accurate recognition of *Friday the 13th's* symbolic legacy and "meaning."

The film's ending, which finds Jason careening to Earth Two like a falling star and landing in the proximity of a body of water, is also a lot of fun. This is New Crystal Lake, a perfect place for him to take up old murderous habits, and so one can view the whole movie as a kind of origin story that gets Jason Voorhees—murderous urban legend—from Point A to Point B.

Typically, outer space tends not to be a fertile terrain for established horror franchises. *Hellraiser* and *Leprechaun* have both gone to the stars, only to experience severe orbital decay. But *Jason X* doesn't suffer the same inglorious fate. Instead, the film gets better, moment to moment, one cribbed inspiration to the next, until it reaches that moment of bliss with the holographic camp counselors.

Was it a mistake sending Jason to space? The *Friday the 13th* saga has made worse mistakes, frankly.

Going to 3-D in 1982 didn't make for great entertainment.

Tossing out a Jason impostor in *A New Beginning* (1985) is also a low point.

And of course, Jason in Manhattan (taking the city alongside the Muppets, presumably), is a historic misstep. Especially since the Big Apple looks more like Toronto in that eighth *Friday* film.

None of those films, showcase the audacity to go big, and to go weird with such apparent confidence. Viewers might laugh a lot during *Jason X*, but they're laughing with the film, not at it.

Jason X features some cool special effects, a well-developed sense of humor, and a worthy upgrade for a durable movie monster. Throw in a fun cameo by genre great David Cronenberg and an utterly ridiculous scene involving Jason just wanting "his machete back," and this movie includes all the

ingredients for a good time at the movies.

*The Mangler 2 (DTV) * **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Lance Henriksen (Headmaster Braeden); Chelse Swain (Joanne Newton); Philippe Bergeron (Chef Lecours); Will Walsh (Dexter Bell); Daniella Evangelista (Emily Stone); Mike Meadows (Corey Banks); Will Sanderson (Dan Channa); Jeff Doucette (Bob); David Christensen (Paul Cody); Ken Camroux (Mr. Newton).

CREW: Banana Brothers Entertainment Inc, Barnholtz Entertainment, Mangler Productions present *The Mangler 2*. Casting: Michelle Lang, Blair Law. Production Design: Matthew Budgeon. Costume Design: Terry Haws. Music: Ferocious Le Fonque. Special Effects: Roy Cutler, Cara E. Anderson, Doc Dave. Director of Photography: Norbert Kaluza. Film Editing: Anthony A. Lewis. Executive Producers: Barry Barnholtz. Producer: Glen B.D Pelzer, Glen Tedham. Written and Directed by: Michael Hamilton-Wright. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A disenfranchised hacker and the daughter of the president of Newton Corporation, Joanna (Newton), downloads the Mangler virus to her state-of-the-art school, Royal Collegiate College. This event happens the day after Headmaster Braeden (Henriksen) has installed a new high-tech security system at the college to protect the students. The virus, Mangler 2.0, takes over, committing murder and causing mayhem on campus on the day only five students, including Joanna, remain there. The virus reaches out into the new world, and takes over Braedan, transforming him into a Borg-like, cyber-monster.

COMMENTARY: As the synopsis above indicates, *The Mangler 2* has absolutely nothing to do with an ambulatory, demonic-possessed laundry-machine, the subject matter of both the 1978 Stephen King story, and the 1995 film adaptation from Tobe Hooper. Instead, this film has more in common with the (disowned) movie version of Stephen King's tale *The Lawn Mower Man*, since it involves the cyber-realm.

However, *The Mangler 2* is not without interest, or value, in light of its historical context. Hooper's *The Mangler* concerned, in a nutty way, the de-valuing of labor and worker safety, in a world where laws like NAFTA gave rich employers access to cheap labor, making it easier for them to ignore safety, living wages, worker health, and so on.

By contrast, *The Mangler 2* is very clearly a post-9/11 film, focusing on America's post-terrorist attack obsession with safety and security. Here, Royal Collegiate College is essentially transformed into a prison camp, with automated door locks, security cameras for surveillance, and even electrified fences. As Henriksen's Braeden notes at one point, "*We all need Big Brother's protection now.*"

Indeed, this was a trade-off that Americans seemed quite willing to make after 9/11, trading freedom and liberty for safety and security, and willing to accept a security state wherein the government could monitor phone calls, etc., without much by way of legal oversight. *The Mangler 2* is set at "*one of the finest schools in the country,*" yet it is also a place where an authoritarian headmaster has total control to do as he sees fit, including invasion of privacy. Joanna hacks the Big Brother type system, an act which captures the real-life idea that some citizens would resent such total control and surveillance and opt to rebel against such an infringement on personal rights. The problem is, of course, that her hack involves an evil, sentient virus.

Yet for all the fascinating context surrounding *The Mangler 2*, it is not a particularly good, or smart film. For example, the name of the college in the movie is Royal Collegiate College. The definition of

collegiate” is widely accepted as “*relating to college*.” So, the school’s name means Royal College College.

That’s just ridiculous.

Secondly, the low-budget nature of the enterprise means that the final revelation, of Henriksen “jacked in” and transformed by the Mangler virus, comes off as silly, and not frightening. He’s got a few token plugs and wires attached to his temples and wrists, and he wears sunglasses. The character sort of bobs up and down, not actually levitating by the wires, as was no doubt intended.

For a movie with high-tech aspirations, the movie looks low tech in the extreme.

The Tubular-Bells knock-off score that plays when the school’s supercomputer gets hacked in the first place also contributes to the idea that the film isn’t really high-minded, instead trading on familiar and hackneyed ideas. And, fans watching the end credits will be disappointed to see that star Lance Henriksen’s name is misspelled as “Henricksen.”

The movie couldn’t even be bothered to spell the lead actor’s name accurately.

Even matters of simple practicality and logic are mishandled in *The Mangler 2*. There is a scene early in the film during which a student is viciously murdered in the college laundry room, and blood spatters all over the white washing machine and dryer. Not long after, another student walks into that room, and it is absolutely spotless.

Is the virus also self-cleaning?

Remember, it has to “build” its arms, legs, and so forth, to move about in our world, outside its cyber home. Does the virus have a mop and wash-cloth attachment?

Even the villain’s in-jokes—such as a reference to a once-popular game show (“*You are the weakest link*,”) or a once-popular song (“*Tell me what you want, what you really, really want*,”), as well as his half-hearted death scene, in which he dribbles white goop (a reference to Bishop’s near death in *Aliens* [1986])—add to the glib, half-hearted and ultimately slapdash feel of the film.

Still, *The Mangler 2* is a veritable masterpiece compared to the next sequel: *Mangler Reborn*.

May * * * ½

Cast & Crew

CAST: Angela Bettis (May Dove Canady); Jeremy Sisto (Adam Stubbs); Anna Faris (Polly); James Duval (Blank); Nichole Hiltz (Ambrosia); Kevin Gage (Papa Canady); Merle Kennedy (Mama Canady); Chandler Riley Hecht (Young May); Rachel David (Petey); Nora Zehetner (Hoop); Will Estes (Chris); Roxanne Day (Buckle); Samantha Adams (Lucille); Brittney Lee Harvey (Diedre); Connor Matheus (Kindergarten Boy); Mike McKee (Dr. Wolf); Tricia Kelly (Amy).

CREW: Lions Gate Films, 2Loop Films and a Loopy Production LLC present *May*. Casting: Shannon Makharian. Production Designer: Leslie Keel. Music: Jay Barnes Luckett; Director of Photography: Steve Yedlin. Film Editors: Debra Goldfield, Rian Johnson, Chris Silverton. Producers: Marius Balchuna, Scott Sturgeon. Executive Producers: Eric Koskin, John Veague. Written and Directed by: Lucky McKee. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young girl, May, lives with her mother in social isolation, in part due to her lazy eye. As an adult, May (Bettis) holds down a job at a veterinary clinic, but still has trouble making friends. May’s best, long-time friend is a doll that her mother gave her. The lonely, awkward May becomes attracted to Adam (Sisto), a mechanic, but after watching a horror film he has made she misunderstands its message and freaks him out. Later, May dates a woman, Polly (Faris), but again is rebuffed. Confused and hurt, May decides to “make” her own perfect friend, like her doll, by killing Adam, Polly, and other acquaintances (including her pet cat) to sew them together into a “perfect” individual.

COMMENTARY: Lucky McKee's *May* is one of the great character studies in horror film history. What the film may lack in terms of conventional virtues such as tension, or terror, it makes up for in its depiction of a most unusual young woman, its titular character. Angela Bettis brings May to life with incredible sensitivity and humanity. One's heart practically breaks watching this lonely, awkward woman navigate modern life, and modern relationships. It's true that May, is, ultimately, a murderer and a monster. Yet McKee and Bettis craft a film of great empathy and humanity. May is sweet yet broken, gentle yet pathological. Bettis's performance make every sad twist in May's life a knife in the side, and what emerges, gore and all, is the portrait of someone who, much to her chagrin and suffering, simply doesn't understand how to connect to others. Worse, that essential human task of building a connection is made more difficult in a shallow, modern society, where it is easier to conform and "ghost" those who don't conform than reach out to someone unique and different.

Perhaps the film is so affecting too, because May almost makes it. The audience watches as she falls for Adam, and there seems to be a sliver of hope, at least, that he will reciprocate her feelings. He comes off as an outsider: an artist, replete with a horror film he made. Yet, ultimately, he is ultra-conventional, and his artistic pretensions are meaningless. May watches his film, a love story that turns coitus into bloody carnage, and takes the wrong message from it. She believes that Adam, like May, is a true outsider, one with truly different views on life. Then, of course, she attempts to ape the behavior that she witnessed in Adam's film, cannibalism, and he is mortified.

For him, being different, being artistic, or a creator, was all a pretend act; a wardrobe he donned. He thus rejects May as being weird and strange, the very thing, one might suggest, his approach to filmmaking was meant to cultivate in an audience. May thinks she found a soulmate but instead finds someone who would rather be part of the unthinking mob than share a deep, if quirkily individualistic connection with another human.

In other words, Adam says he "*likes weird*," but that's not true at all.

May is socially awkward and confused, and doesn't understand the real Adam, or that his film is just a play for self-glorification, and her obsession with him becomes dangerous and pathological over time. Another failed relationship involves Polly. Like Adam, Polly is a lot less "special" than she judges herself. It's true, she is a lesbian, and not therefore, part of what society would dub mainstream in 2002, no doubt. But Polly is opportunistic and interested in sex only. Like Adam, Polly's quirks are all about how she presents in society, a cultivated self-image, and not about how she connects to others.

The movie's gift is that the performances, writing, and direction all make the audience empathize with May, not with Adam or Polly. Indeed, one will be heartsick watching it, as this lonely but deeply sweet young woman fails time and time again to find happiness. The inference of the film seems to be not that the problem is May, though she is definitively a strange bird, but society itself. From the beginning, May is not accepted, because of her lazy eye. From the beginning of her life, society seeks to ostracize May as being different, and therefore not valuable. Adam and Polly, through pretenders at being "different" merely conform to society's edicts about acceptable behavior.

So, two things are true, here. The first is that May is legitimately strange, a product of her unhealthy upbringing and her mother's inability to see past her lazy eye. Yet, May is inherently loveable, in spite of her awkwardness and naiveté. Watching the film, the audience falls in love with her, certainly. The second thing that is true is that May is outmatched by a society which ruthlessly demands and polices a narrow band of behavior and decorum. A budding filmmaker willing to broach the taboo of cannibalism, and a lesbian, pretend to be different (and therefore attract May and vice versa), but in fact conform to the same narrow band of expectations and rules.

In this way, what *May* really concerns is American society itself, and its parochial attitudes, even in the face of a more progressive approach to sexual orientation, or loosened standards in filmmaking. The film warns that people are afraid and repelled by anyone who exists outside the narrow norm of convention. The way May responds is no doubt anti-social, but it is also revolutionary. She begins to take the pieces of society that she likes (as represented by the body parts of Adam and Polly and others) and stitches them into something new; to create her own tapestry of normal.

Sure, this is pretty sick on a literal level. May commits murder and plays Frankenstein. On the

On the other hand, she does what she can for herself. On a metaphorical level, she has begun to sew together a new meaning in her life, one that she can live with and serves her needs as a human being. She follows her mother's advice: "If you can't find a friend, make one."

So yeah, it's gross.

It's wrong for May to kill, and it's not like the movie condones slicing people up. But on the other hand, the film does make one empathize and identify with May and her choices. Through little fault of her own, she has been cast out from society, judged unable to "fit in." So, what does she do? She begins to "make" a new normal that she can live with. Again, this seems a comment on a society that imposes norms, and also on art. Adam's art is pretty and bloody, and ultimately toothless. He doesn't live up to the messages in his art, and in fact, has no desire to do so. He just wants to be seen and lauded for his vision, but that vision means nothing. May's art is Amy, the "doll" she brings to life with the pieces of the society that despised her. Amy consists of her cat's fur, her own lazy eye, Adam's hands, and Polly's neck, for starters. Each one of those pieces is organic to May's character and experience, one might argue. The art she creates may be horrific, but it means something to her, and it has a point. It is important that May gives Amy her "lazy eye." It is that lazy eye, perhaps, that made society see her as weird. Now Amy will be a fellow traveler, because of the same eye.

"All I want," May notes, is for someone to "see" the real her.

May is not a traditional horror film. It doesn't build suspense through its kills, and it doesn't feature jump scares. Instead, it introduces the horror genre to one of its most human and unforgettable characters, a woman, May, whose lazy eye and social awkwardness make her persona non gratis in a superficial, fast-moving American society. Thanks to Bettis, audiences will fall in love with May, even if they don't quite fall in love with the movie the same way.

In McKee's hands, *May* is a really good movie. In Bettis' hands, May is a character for the ages, one whose spirit is more powerful than the work that contains her.

Queen of the Damned *

Critical Reception

"The latest film to hit our cinemas will probably damn you to eternal boredom—or leave a sharp pain in your neck. *Queen of the Damned* is a relatively lifeless version of the second screen installment from Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles*. (The first, *Interview with a Vampire*, starred Tom Cruise). It's also endless, thanks to overextended special effects and over-the-top vamping."—Alice Burton, *Sunday Territorian*: "Vampire flick short on bite," April 07, 2002, page 23.

"After Stuart Townsend's androgynous Lestat rises from his crumbling New Orleans mausoleum, summoned back to life by heavy metal, Michael Rymer's revision of two books of Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* rapidly becomes sillier and sillier, and more and more boring to boot. Despite the presence of two prestigious European stars, France's Vincent Perez and Sweden's Lena Olin, the Australian-made sequel to Neil Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire* soon slips into a gimmick-inflated music video, full of blurry jump cuts and fast, zigzagging camera movements."—Malcolm Johnson, *Hartford Courant*: "*Queen of the Damned* Lacks Sufficient Cinematic Blood," February 22, 2002, page D1.

"Though *Queen of the Damned* director Michael Rymer captures the essence of Rice's succulently bleak settings and opulently decadent characters, in 100 minutes, he cannot provide enough meat to satisfy the plot requirements. Characters are truncated to such a degree that script motivations have been squashed, but damn does it look great.

Interview with a Vampire suffered from a foppish performance by Tom Cruise, but here, Stuart Townsend has nailed the voracious, sly vampire Lestat. Part Jim Morrison, part porno star, Townsend swaggers with utter conviction. He always seems on the verge of an orgasm. Aaliyah smolders in what could have been her breakthrough performance had a plane crash not taken her from this world. In her opening scene, when she slinks into a bar and lets the vampires know who is boss, she commands the screen. Her exit, a wink to

Stephen King's *Carrie*, is pure cinema. The beautiful Marguerite Moreau as Jesse, the human obsessed with Lestat, resembles a rag doll one tear from disintegrating. She adds the passion behind the motivations missing in the script. The script should have been longer. Writers Scott Abbott and Michael Petroni have an ear for Anne Rice's ironic dialogue, but major plot points needed to be addressed. Abbreviating the powerful vampire Armand to one line is as incongruous as Barbra Streisand filming *The Prince of Tides* and then deleting Luke, the title character, from the script."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Aaliyah (Queen Akasha); Stuart Townsend (Lestat); Marguerite Moreau (Jesse); Vincent Perez (Marius); Paul McGann (David Talbot); Lena Olin (Maharet); Christian Manon (Mael); Claudia Black (Pandora); Bruce Spence (Khayman); Matthew Newton (Armand); Tírel Mora (Roger); Megan Dornan (Maudy); Jonathan Devoy (James); Robert Farnham (Alex); Conrad Standish (T.C.).

CREW: Warner Bros. presents, in association with Village Roadshow Pictures and NPV Entertainment, a Material Production, *Queen of the Damned*. Casting: Greg Apps, Kristy Sager. Production Designer: Graham Walker. Costume Designer: Angus Strathie. Director of Photography: Ian Baker. Music: Jonathan Davis, Richard Gibbs. Film Editor: Dany Cooper. Producer: Jorge Saralegui. Executive Producers: Sue Armstrong, Bruce Berman, Bill Gerber, Andrew Mason. Based on the novels of: Anne Rice. Written by: Scott Abbott, Michael Petroni. Directed by: Michael Rymer. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The vampire Lestat (Townsend) awakens after a century of slumber and, intrigued by the modern world, becomes an international rock star. In doing so, he betrays the vampire code of secrecy, and openly admonishes other vampires to out themselves to the public. However, a new threat awakens, the ancient Queen Akasha (Aaliyah), even as a human reporter, Jesse (Moreau), becomes enamored with Lestat and seeks to learn all about his world, and the shadowy hierarchy of vampires. Soon Lestat allies himself with Akasha, or at least appears to do so, even as the dark queen launches a reign of terror.

COMMENTARY: Today, *Queen of the Damned* is largely remembered as the final film of rising pop star Aaliyah. She died in a plane crash in the Bahamas on August 25, 2001, just as her mainstream career trajectory was skyrocketing. And from the evidence of the film itself, the 22-year-old Aaliyah possessed a powerful screen presence. As Akasha, she moves through the frames of this film with a kind of feral elegance, making her untimely death even more tragic. Indeed, her performance as the vampire queen is one of the only memorable things about this otherwise terrible vampire film.



Stuart Townsend plays vampire and rock star Lestat in *Queen of the Damned* (2002).

One must wonder how Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* came to this ignominious end. *Interview with a Vampire* (1994) had not been without controversy (particularly in the casting of Tom Cruise as Lestat) but it had nonetheless proven a big hit at the box office. This follow-up does not involve any cast members from *Interview*, nor director Neil Jordan. And its script is an amalgamation of ill-fitting pieces from different Anne Rice books, which makes the effort, at times, incomprehensible. The narrative details of *Queen of the Damned* also clearly conflict with the history of Lestat, as portrayed in *Interview with a Vampire*. Here, he is shown to have been slumbering for a 100 years, not out and about tormenting Louis.

Queen of the Damned also dispenses with the overt homo eroticism, scattershot though it was, of Jordan's *Interview with a Vampire*. Here, Lestat argues for vampires to reveal themselves to the public, and one supposes this could be compared to "*coming out of the closet*," but it is all handled in such an abstract, non-sexualized fashion that the comparison reads like a stretch. The line "*why hide it in this day and age?*" certainly fits the metaphor, but again, it arises in societal terms, not character terms. Especially since in this film, Lestat's primary romances are with Jesse and Akasha, both of the female persuasion.

Instead of focusing on the homosexual metaphors inherent in the author's works, *Queen of the Damned* seems content to portray Lestat as a vampiric Jim Morrison, an undead Lizard King, strutting about on stage and fashioning a new mythology around his stage persona. Certainly, the idea of "*sex, blood and rock-and-roll*," as the movie describes it, feels like a good idea when one thinks of gaunt Mick Jagger, or skeletal Steve Tyler, still rocking on in their later years with high energy, utterly immortal in their own fashion. Their continued presence on the rock scene brings to mind the idea, played in *Queen of the Damned*, of "*old Gods on new streets*." But again, this feels like a thin concept upon which to hang a film that, clearly, aspired to jump-start a movie franchise on hiatus.



The late Aaliyah plays Akasha, the titular *Queen of the Damned* (2002) in the film of the same name.

Perhaps the greatest problem with the film is that it makes Lestat something of a cipher, so that his character is not ever truly known. The crux of the drama arises from what side he ultimately chooses to take. Will he protect humanity (and Jesse), or will he follow Queen Akasha on her reign of terror, as her king? The audience should have a sense of Lestat's character, so that his decision makes sense, resonates, and is true to his history. Instead, his final decision feels arbitrary, especially since it seems to be tethered to the lukewarm love story involving Jesse. Is this young human researcher really the person he wants to be with? He could be with Louis, Akasha, or even Marius, and he chooses Jesse?

So not only is he not gay, but he, an immortal, chooses a lover of callow youth to spend eternity with? Why?

What is this, anyway, *Twilight*?

At least there, Edward Cullen is true to the character his author establishes for him. Stuart Townsend's version of Lestat is milquetoast, shallow, and all too mainstream. He may be a vampire rock star, but Lestat's immortal heart beats for white bread, apparently.

Red Dragon * * ½

Critical Reception

"Ratner starts on the wrong note when Lecter kills a flutist whose playing he doesn't like and then serves the cooked flesh to his society friends. Although he once sautéed Ray Liotta's brain, Lecter would never commit such a jolly joke killing. Then the section gets muffed where the FBI profiler visits a crime scene and imagines step-by-step what the killer did. Ratner mutes the horror of what happened so this key scene isn't scary or even memorable. Ratner also fails to capture the FBI profiler's inner turmoil—Norton shouldn't be simply repulsed and saddened; he should be tormented because he recognizes that the sadistic sickness lurks within himself, too. Still, the movie has its moments, especially the blind-girl shotgun climax and flaming Philip Seymour Hoffman."—Mark Robison, *Reno-Gazette Journal*, April 4, 2003, page H16.

"Michael Mann's *Manhunter* is a dated film, a kind of *Miami Vice* meets the Tooth Fairy experience, so when word came out that Anthony Hopkins was going to play Hannibal Lecter in a remake, I can't say I wasn't happy—we all love Hopkins in that role (no disrespect to Brian Cox). It's a good, solid adaptation of the Thomas Harris novel, and Ralph Fiennes was particularly good as the Tooth Fairy (but not necessarily better than Tom Noonan had been in *Manhunter*).

This is a difficult film to critique—it's less upsetting than Hannibal was, the cast is uniformly good, it's a remake of a film that's not bad—it makes for a complete set of Anthony Hopkins films for the Lecter trilogy, and I think I like *Manhunter* better. Surprisingly, I think the *Hannibal* television series has eclipsed both films in its adaptation of the Thomas Harris novel—it's not as faithful, it's just really, really good.

I think that's my problem with *Red Dragon*—it's not really, really good in any sense of the word. It has Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter. That's about it. Not even some sweet Iron Butterfly music."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

"Unlike Jonathan Demme's Oscar-winning direction in *Silence of The Lambs* and *Hannibal* director Ridley Scott's baroque treatment of the madman in Florence, Italy, *Red Dragon's* director Brett Ratner is a technician, not an artist. He's earned his action stripes directing the swift *Rush Hour* action/comedies. But his tone disrupts the storyline we've been led down in the previous two sequels, not to mention the original version of *Red Dragon* called *Manhunter*, directed by Michael Mann.

The second problem is inherent in the plot. Our favorite villain, Hannibal The Cannibal (played here for a third time by Anthony Hopkins)—the reason they've made this prequel in the first place—is a minor player. He's tucked away in his cell, never in danger of cooking any cast members. It's like watching the Grand Prix when all the cars have run out of gas.

Lector's ying is also missing the yang of Clarice Starling. Their incestuous father/daughter relationship was the kernel of the sequels. I couldn't get riled up about the cat-and-mouse confrontations between Lector and the detective (However, Bryan Fuller completely solidifies the homoerotic dynamic of the two in his TV series, *Hannibal*). I wanted Clarice. *Red Dragon* was like watching Romeo and his first girlfriend, Bertha.

And that's the last problem with the film; Will Graham isn't the best detective. They keep telling us that he's got an innate ability to see from the killer's point of view, but the killer's identity was so obvious, the only reason Will couldn't discover it within the first 30 minutes is because it would end the film early. Therefore, he scurries around without noticing the clues around him."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

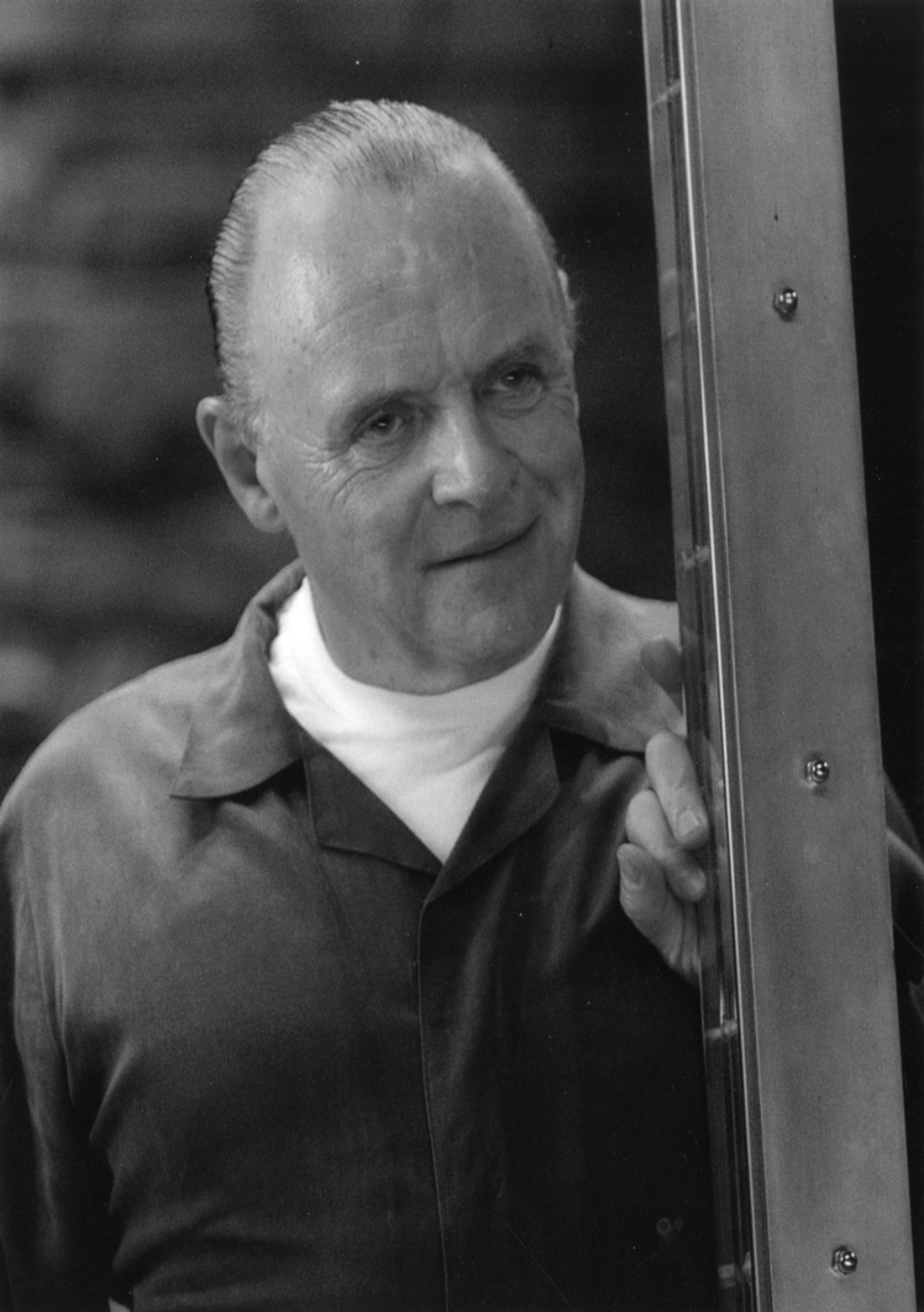
CAST: Anthony Hopkins (Dr. Hannibal Lecter); Edward Norton (Will Graham); Ralph Fiennes (Francis Dolarhyde); Harvey Keitel (Jack Crawford); Emily Watson (Reba McClane); Mary-Louise Parker (Molly Graham); Philip Seymour Hoffman (Freddy Lounds); Anthony Heald (Dr. Frederick Hilton); Ken Leung (Lloyd Bowman); Frankie Faison (Barney Matthews); Tyler Patrick Jones (Josh Graham); Lalo Schiffrin (Conductor);

Tom Verica (Charles Leeds); Margeurite MacIntyre (Valerie Leeds); Tommy Curtis (Billy Leeds); Jordan Gruber (Sean Leeds); Morgan Gruber (Susie Leeds); Azura Skye (Bookseller); William Lucking (Metcalf); Elizabeth Dennehy (Beverly).

CREW: Universal Pictures and Dino De Laurentiis, in association with MGM present *Red Dragon*. Casting: Francine Maisler. Production Designer: Kristi Zea. Costume Designer: Betsy Heimann. Special Effects: Cinesite. Music: Danny Elfman. Director of Photography: Dante Spinotti. Film Editor: Mark Helfrich. Producers: Dino De Laurentiis, Martha De Laurentiis. Executive Producer: Andrew Z. Davis. Based on the novel by: Thomas Harris. Written by: Ted Tally. Directed by: Brett Ratner. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 124 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Will Graham (Norton), an FBI profiler of remarkable insight and imagination, captures Hannibal Lecter (Hopkins) but is badly injured during the arrest attempt. Years later, a still-traumatized Graham has retired from service, but is recruited by Jack Crawford (Keitel) to hunt down another serial killer, this one known as “The Tooth Fairy.” Graham reluctantly accepts the task, and realizes that to understand this new psychotic killer, he must visit Hannibal, and learn more from him. The case leads Graham to Francis Dolarhyde (Fiennes), a murderer who fancies himself a powerful dragon. But Hannibal also knows the identity of the killer and sends Dolarhyde on a quest to kill Graham’s family.

COMMENTARY: *Red Dragon* is a handsomely produced, but ultimately inferior remake of Michael Mann’s 1986 adaptation of the Harris novel, *Manhunter*. *Red Dragon* is also the weakest and blandest of the original Lecter movies up to this point, a stable in that in 2002 includes *Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal* and the aforementioned *Manhunter*. Not only is the film’s story overly familiar, but the film is directed without much style or depth, in a fashion that leaves only the performances of Hopkins and Fiennes to keep it afloat. Norton is unengaging as Will Graham, Hannibal’s nemesis here, and the story is nothing that, by 2002, had not been seen in serial killer movies or TV programming (such as *Millennium* or *The X-Files*) a dozen times already. By 2002, the whole “get into the head of a serial killer” trope had become so overdone as to be ridiculous (see: *The Watcher*), and *Red Dragon* doesn’t add anything new to the mix. It is the first Lecter movie not to feel suspenseful, or dangerous. Perhaps the prequel nature of the film works to its disadvantage as well, since everyone knows that Hannibal doesn’t escape custody until *Silence of the Lambs*, following his meetings with Clarice Starling.



He'd like to have you for dinner. A view of Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) in the prequel to *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Red Dragon* (2002).

Similarly, there is nothing offered in *Red Dragon* that can match the thrill or unpredictability of Ridley Scott's *Hannibal*, which depicts Lecter "*in the wild*," free to commit his nefarious (but strangely moral) acts. In the 2010s, the Lecter mythology was re-imagined again as a TV series, called *Hannibal*. Once more, the *Red Dragon* story was depicted, but in that case—and serialized over several weeks—there was an opportunity to dig deeply into the material and make it fresh, and new.

This version of *Red Dragon* arrives at the meaningful end of the serial killer cinema as a force in horror movies, and, at that juncture, feels like an uninspired rehash of other, better films, including the other Lecter movies. It feels a lot like this movie was rushed to cinemas on the heels of *Hannibal*, to capitalize on that film's success before the public's fascination with Hannibal the Cannibal waned. The problem, of course, is that audiences wanted to see a film that followed on from the ending of *Hannibal*, with the killer free, and still on the loose. Audiences wanted to see the next chapter of his relationship with Clarice. By going back to a pre-Clarice time, *Red Dragon* satisfied very few fans, especially since *Manhunter* is highly regarded by most fans.



This man can get inside the head of a serial killer. But why should he do it again? Edward Norton plays Will Graham in Brett Ratner's *Red Dragon* (2002).

Consider it this way: Imagine that George Lucas created *Star Wars*, then *The Empire Strikes Back*, but then skipped *Return of the Jedi* to go back to make *The Phantom Menace* first. Audiences would have rightly felt cheated, that they had been robbed of knowing what happens next, or how the characters move forward. So aside from *Red Dragon*'s, bland, style-less approach, conceptually the film is a cheat, or at the very least, a step in the wrong direction. By going back, the filmmakers deprive the audience of seeing new aspects of Hannibal's character. It's true, *Red Dragon* depicts his capture, which was discussed in earlier films, but the film also fails to convince on this front, as Anthony Hopkins must play the same character, only years younger than when he played him for the first time, in 1991. By 2001, he was a much bigger man than he was in 1991, and so physically, he does not resemble the younger character.

The Hannibal Lecter film series was always the top of the line in terms of serial killer cinema. Lecter was the spiritual heir, in the horror genre, to sarcastic, talking killers like Freddy Krueger. But by 2002, it is difficult—unless the film is very, very stylish—to get worked up about the reliving of tropes that are fifteen years old. These tropes include the traumatized detective who comes out of retirement to solve one last case, the attack on the detective's family, the one-on-one tête-à-tête between investigator and criminal, which *Hannibal* knew to avoid, so it didn't feel derivative of *Silence of the Lambs*, and so on. For Hannibal Lecter to return to screens in 2002 in a recycled story, in a past era, with a director at the helm who had no real sense of style, horror, or even the operatic, does the charismatic screen monster no favors. The movie is not terrible. It's a passable time waster if it shows up on network television, but all of the franchise's sharp edges are now gone, and that's a shame.

Resident Evil ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"One of the better shoot 'em up games in computing history comes to the big screen in a way that is not only near unrecognizable, but also one of the most disappointing adaptations of a game ever."—Garth Franklin, *Dark Horizons*, June 13, 2002.

"Even by the low standards we have come to expect, *Resident Evil* is a tiresome, unedifying spectacle filled with leaden dialogue, British actors struggling with dodgy American accents and some pretty low-grade, chopped liver special effects. Watching another wave of shuffling, bug-eyed zombie flesh eaters being sprayed with gunfire to the accompaniment of ear-splitting rock music, you can't help but assume an old fuddy duddy attitude and ask yourself if this is what really passes for entertainment these days?"—*Scotland on Sunday*: "Resident Evil: Game over for Resident Evil," July 9, 2002.

"As in Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, a vague social message is buried in the gore-corporations are bad. And like Carpenter's *Halloween* and *The Thing*, *Resident* hits the ground running and never looks back. But after an hour of propulsive pacing the shock value wears off, and all that's left is pop-up carnage."—Hank Sartin, *Chicago Reader*, July 25, 2019.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Milla Jovovich (Alice); Eric Mabius (Matt); Michelle Rodriguez (Rain); Colin Salmon (One); James Purefoy (Spence); Michaela Dicker (Red Queen); Stephen Billington (Mr. White); Martin Crewes (Kaplan); Ryan McCluskey (Mr. Grey); Oscar Pearce (Mr. Red); Indra Ove (Mrs. Black); Anna Bolt (Dr. Green); Joseph May (Dr. Blue); Robert Tannion (Dr. Brown); Heike Makatsch (Lisa); Jaymes Butler (Clarence); Fiona Glascott (Ms. Gold).

CREW: Screen Gems, Constantin Film, and Davis films, in Association with Impact Pictures presents a New Legacy Film, A Paul W.S. Anderson film, *Resident Evil*. Casting: Robyn Ray, Suzanne Smith. Costume and Production Designer: Richard Bridgland. Special Effects: Animated Extras International, The Computer Film Company, Die Nefzers, AMX Studios Ltd. Music: Marco Beltrami, Marilyn Manson. Director of Photography: David Johnson. Film Editor: Alexander Berner. Producers: Paul W.S. Anderson, Jeremy Bolt, Bernd Eichinger,

Samuel Hadida. Executive Producers: Victor Hadida, Daniel Kletzky, Robert Kluzer, Yoshiko Okamoto. Based on the video game by: Capcom Entertainment. Written and Directed by: Paul W.S. Anderson. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A woman named Alice (Jovovich) has lost her memory but joins a team of commandos on their quest beneath Raccoon City to infiltrate the high-tech "Hive" facility belonging to the international Umbrella Corporation. Inside the subterranean center, a man-made zombie-producing agent called the T-Virus has been released, transforming its occupants into ravenous ghouls. As Alice slowly recovers her memories and knowledge of her clandestine purpose, as well as her amazing gun-fighting, martial-arts abilities, she goes to war with dog zombies, ghouls, and the mysterious computer overlord of the facility, the Red Queen. As Alice fights these powers, she also grows closer to Matt (Mabius), a man for whom Umbrella has planned a unique destiny.

COMMENTARY: Capcom's popular horror survival video game, *Resident Evil*, first released in 1996, came to the silver screen after a long development process (involving George A. Romero), under the auspices of Paul W.S. Anderson, who had impressed horror fans with his *Hellraiser* in space masterpiece, *Event Horizon* (1997). Like many 2000s era video-game-to-movie adaptations (see: *Doom* [2005]) *Resident Evil* ultimately introduced new central characters and new situations while maintaining some aspects of the beloved game. The isolated mansion-in-the-woods setting that had been a key aspect of the game's appeal feels more like a brief after-thought in the movie, which focuses on action more than an atmospheric exploration of an old, gloomy house. Despite this shift, *Resident Evil* leads the decade's trend towards fusing horror and action into mainstream blockbusters.



Alice (Milla Jovovich) is primed for action in the Hive, in the video-game adaptation *Resident Evil* (2002).

Despite the change from lonely, dark reconnaissance of a mansion to story of command and infiltrating a high-tech underground installation, *Resident Evil* nonetheless genuflects to its spiritual predecessor's format. At various points throughout the movie's narrative, for instance, director Anderson cuts to imagery of a holographic map of the Hive, thus mimicking the "map" function often encountered in horror survival games. The audience can chart the infiltration team's progress through various levels of the Hive. Intriguingly, at the same time the map function mirrors the video game play, it also seems to refer to Robert Wise's *The Andromeda Strain* (1972), which was also set in a high-tech, subterranean laboratory in which a dangerous virus had run amok.

Similarly, Alice's awakening, slowly growing skills represent a good metaphor for the deep and increasing immersion in any survival horror video game. As the film starts, Alice experiences amnesia, and doesn't know exactly who she is, where she is, or what she is supposed to do. This blank slate, of course, represents the first go at game play for the user. It's all new. Nothing is familiar. The more you play, however, the better you get, and the more facility you come to demonstrate with the "controls" of the game. After hours of play, one becomes a skilled fighting and killing machine, able to plow down zombies by the handful if necessary. Alice's skills likewise "reawaken" in the film, and her progress from amnesiac to quasi-terminator nicely suggests the nature of adaptive, first person play.

Resident Evil also adopts the format/structure of many horror survival video games by featuring, essentially, staggered boss-battles. Alice goes up against the zombie hounds, for instance, a lower level boss battle, but by the end of the film is engaged in a battle against a bigger boss that is, unfortunately, rendered with very poor CGI. In games, the boss battle is the threshold, the challenge that takes the user/player from one level of expertise to the next. *Resident Evil* utilizes its periodic fights in a narrative way that could be described fairly as parallel.

A common but very wrong critique of video games involves the argument that they are mindless time wasters, without any social value or commentary. The movie version of *Resident Evil* is not merely dumb fun, though it is also, at times, dumb fun. On the contrary, the film knowingly and consistently delivers a very powerful anti-corporate message. The Umbrella Corporation is described as the largest corporate agency in the United States and a lead supplier of health care and technology. It operates in a way that suggests it is immune from regulation and oversight. And, of course, it is Umbrella's fault that its creation, the T-Virus, gets loose.

Big business is the real enemy of the people, the movie reveals, with the zombies and dogs and other beasts all victims or at least products of its misanthropy. Here, the corporation has its tentacles everywhere. Even Alice's wedding ring is adorned with the inscription "*property of Umbrella Corp.*" The idea of corporations as villains is familiar to Americans in the early 2000s as succeeding business scandals rocked the country and caused economic recession. First there was the Enron scandal of 2001, and then, following that, the World Com scandal of 2002. In such cases, Americans were seeing that books were cooked, profits were rigged, and oversight and regulation were sorely inadequate. The craven profiteers at Enron had even labeled their strategy to increase profits by manipulating California's energy grid during the energy crisis of 2000–2001 "*the Death Star*."¹² Again, this corporation sought to make money by depriving some American citizens of power. And it knowingly named its business model after a mythical evil empire's doomsday weapon, renowned for destroying planets that wouldn't cave to its will.

Perhaps *Resident Evil's* Umbrella Corp is just a step or two removed from such reality.

Resident Evil also deserves kudos for its depiction of its female characters. Both Alice and Rain, are strong, capable warriors who act according to their individual code of ethics or morality. They lead men, make smart decisions, and go up against an evil enemy, the Red Queen, who has also taken on a female appearance. The question in movies like this is always: do movies put women in these action roles because men like to watch women kicking ass? Or is there a genuine effort to create female characters with their own agency and power. With good performances from Jovovich and Rodriguez, it is difficult to deny that *Resident Evil* is an example of the latter. As if to acknowledge a generational torch being passed, Anderson at one point during the action stages a shot that is identical to one of Ripley in Ridley Scott's groundbreaking *Alien* (1979). Late in that film, Ripley was managing a ship overrun by a

monster, and a self-destruct scene. Moving up a ladder onto a new deck, Scott's camera captures in close-up her grimy hands and fingernails. That's the first we see of Ripley as she comes into frame. Here Alice gets an identical treatment: her dirty hands/fingernail coming through a grate into frame. The moment is an homage to Ripley, horror's first and greatest action hero, and a torch-passing to Jovovich's Alice, who is certainly an icon of the 2000s horror genre.

In terms of visual style, *Resident Evil* feels very much like a child of *The Matrix* (1999). Like that film, it is also dominated by fast motion/slow-motion battle scenes, a technique which heightens the impact of each deadly blow, and again, doesn't feel entirely unlike video game play, where senses are heightened during battle sequences. The film's high point, and most remembered scene is the one in which the Hive's defense system sends out a laser grid which cut people to ribbons in the most creative and disgusting manner. The heroes find themselves trapped in a narrow corridor with the laser grid bearing down on them, and the suspense and terror is real. In moments like this, the movie really works. At other times, the zombie action feels a bit more routine in comparison.

Although poorly received by critics, *Resident Evil* quickly became the highest earning movie based on a video game in history, and generated a number of sequels fronted by Jovovich in both the 2000s and the 2010s. Most of the sequels are not as good as the first film. This effort is a high point for the series.

The Ring ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"The film is one of the most intelligent and genuinely scary ghost stories to come around in a long time. The acting is adequate, and Verbinski directs with a Hitchcock confidence and menace, filling his compositions with subtle nuances and homages to horror classics."—Alex Kaloostian, *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 18, 2002.

"*The Ring* also redeems its loopy plot with some killer concepts. In a gruff cameo, Brian Cox (*Manhunter*) rants, 'What is it with you reporters? You take one person's tragedy and force the world to experience it, spread it like a sickness!' Said sickness grows more virulent with our heroine's conclusive discovery about her fate and the evil tape, in a denouement that hardly offers hope for humanity. Her dark revelation comes as a relief, for at last Dreamworks has given us the stuff of nightmare."—Gregory Weinkauf, *Cleveland Scene*: "Tapeheads," October 16, 2002.

"If you've never seen *Ringu*, the Japanese original, *The Ring* is a good film. If you've seen *Ringu*, it's still a good film. As trans-Pacific remakes go, this is one of the good ones. While there are scary moments throughout the film, it rachets up the intensity in the third act, and these are the scenes that will generally haunt viewers when the movie is over. This film introduced many Americans to the 'scary woman with long, straggly black hair' trope from Japanese films (and remember, many in the West saw this film before *Ju-On* or the original *Ringu*), so the Americanized version (like *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* did for *Gojira* back in the 1950s) helped introduce an entire genre to a larger audience. *The Ring* is more polished, perhaps, than its Japanese predecessor but doesn't necessarily top it—they're fine companion pieces, however (unlike *Ju-On* and *The Grudge*—where the former is required viewing and the latter can be skipped).

Introducing J-Horror to western audiences (which this film did) provided a much-needed jolt of energy to the horror genre, embracing simplicity, more subdued, less overly graphic horror than the gory, over-the-top horror most common in the 1990s. For a while there, anything J-Horror was worth watching, introducing a wave of horror of such quality that it mirrors the late 1970s in some ways—and *The Ring* was the first splash of that wave."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

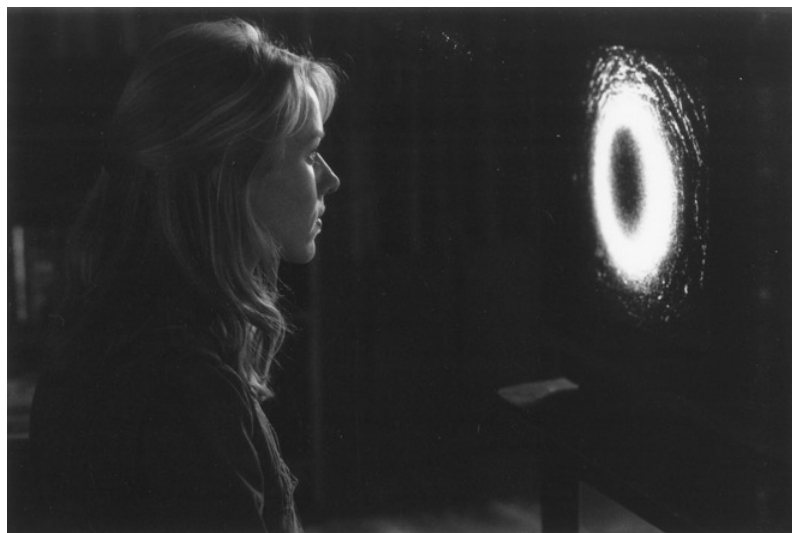
CAST: Naomi Watts (Rachel); Martin Henderson (Noah); David Dorfman (Aidan); Brian Cox (Richard Morgan); Jane Alexander (Dr. Grasnik); Lindsay Frost (Ruth); Amber Tamblyn (Katie); Rachael Bella (Becca); Daveigh Chase (Samara); Shannon Cochran (Anna Morgan); Sandra Thigpen (Teacher); Richard Lineback (Innkeeper).

CREW: Dreamworks, MacDonald/Parkes Productions and BenderSpink present *The Ring*. Casting: Denis Chaiman. Production Designer: Tom Duffield. Costume Designer: Julie Weiss. Special Effects: Asylum, Bischoff's Taxidermy and Animal FX, Cinovation Studios, Matte World Digital, Method Studios, Rhythm and Hues Studios, Tippet Studio. Music: Hans Zimmer. Director of Photography: Bojan Bazelli. Film Editing: Craig Wood. Based on the novel by: Koji Suzuki. Based on *Ringu* by: Hiroshi Takahashi. Written by: Ehren Kruger. Directed by: Gore Verbinski. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 115 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: When a teenager, Katie (Tamblyn), dies exactly seven days after viewing a mysterious VHS tape, her aunt, journalist Rachel Keller (Watts), investigates her death. Rachel finds and watches the tape herself at a mountain cabin, and then realizes, after a creepy phone call, that she has just one week to live. With help from her estranged boyfriend, Noah (Henderson), Rachel attempts to find the maker of the tape. The trail leads back to the Morgan family, who lived and kept horses on Moesko Island. While Rachel attempts to talk to Mr. Morgan, she learns of his daughter, a little girl named Samara (Chase) and her incarceration at a local psychiatric facility. Apparently, the girl had frightening psychic powers, including the capacity to burn imagery on X-ray film or videotape. Noah visits that facility but finds that

Samara is long gone. Meanwhile, Rachel must accelerate her efforts to find Samara and end her curse because her sensitive son, Aidan (Dorfman), has also watched the dangerous videotape, and will die in seven days.

COMMENTARY: *The Ring* (2002), an American remake of *Ringu* (1998) from director Gore Verbinski, commenced the Japanese/Asian horror remake trend of over a decade ago. Some may view this fact as a negative legacy, since the trend ultimately resulted in some truly bad horror films, like *The Eye* (2008) and *One Missed Call* (2008). On the other hand, *The Ring* is universally-acclaimed as the best of the J-Horror remake breed, and this author would name it one of the ten best horror films from the span 2000–2009. The film succeeds not only because it is scary as hell, especially considering it is rated PG-13, but because, like all the great horror movies in history, it expresses important truths about the age in which it was created.



Before you die, see *The Ring* (2002), one of the 2000s greatest horror movies. Top: Rachel Keller (Naomi Watts)

watches Samara's haunted video tape. Bottom: Rachel (Watts) teams with ex-boyfriend Noah (Martin Henderson) to untangle the mystery of Samara.

In this case, *The Ring* obsesses on the notion that modern technology is not connecting or informing the population of the 21st century, but rather negatively influencing and otherwise harming them. The movie concerns a VHS tape that will kill you if you watch it but will permit you to live in peace if you pass it on to other viewers. In the social media-heavy Web 2.0 Age of “shares” and “retweets” this cycle of copying and re-broadcasting takes on an even greater significance than it did during the movie’s immediate post-9/11 milieu. *The Ring* raises an important and fascinating question: What happens when disturbing imagery goes out to millions of people—young and old alike— instantaneously? What are the repercussions for people and communities when this footage is seen, seen again, and then manipulated and disseminated? *The Ring* conveys this idea of instantaneous information transmission in unforgettable visual terms. The entirety of the story is presented in a kind of desaturated, silver coloring, an intentional reflection of the twilight, static-laden world of reflected computer monitors or TV light. And the film’s boogeyman, *a monstrous child who literally climbs out of a TV set*, is depicted with blurs, hiccups and periodic visual interference. She is a digitized image come to life. But this boogeyman is something else too. She is also the ghost of a forgotten emotion (rage) or story, one bouncing around the airwaves, never truly dead, always ready to return.

The film opens with two teenage girls discussing TV signals and phone signals killing brain cells. “*I hate television*,” Katie (Amber Tamblyn) says. “*It gives me headaches. You know, I heard there are so many magnetic waves traveling through the air, because of TV and telephones, that we’re losing ten times as many brain cells as we’re supposed to. Like, all the molecules in our heads are all unstable. All the companies know about it, but they’re not doing anything about it. It’s, like, a big conspiracy.*” This chunk of dialogue reveals a few important points. First, it reveals that the girls live in a pervasive culture of distrust. Katie, at least, is fearful that she doesn’t know the truth about how her everyday technology works, and furthermore doesn’t trust the establishment—government, business, science, or the media—to explain it truthfully.

Secondly, Katie’s dialogue suggests that modern technology plainly and simply kills, murdering brain cells a little at a time. This urban legend conveys, in a nutshell, the film’s critique of modern technology. Under the guise of connecting people to those they love these high-tech instruments actually kill the user. *The Ring* proves very concerned, indeed, with the idea of signals of an inappropriate or unsafe nature entering a person’s house, and even psyche, unbidden. Why should the movie obsess on this notion? Well, in real life, it was a topic of some controversy. America had just been through Bill Clinton’s impeachment hearings, wherein fellatio was discussed around-the-clock on 24-hour cable news-stations. Many American parents complained about having to explain sexual terminology to their young children. And then again, soon after that, the 24-hour news stations broadcast hour upon hour of horrific imagery from the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and even the bullet-ridden corpses of Saddam Hussein’s sons.

Again, how can one explain these events and images to the very young, or the unprepared? Although horror movies when they air on TV must contextualize their visualizations with ratings explaining suitability for the young, newscasts come with no such warnings, and carry no such requirements.

At one point in *The Ring*, Rachel steps out of her apartment, onto a ledge, and peers down into an adjacent apartment building. She is the only person standing outside in the vast complex. The film then cuts to a long, impersonal shot of the building, where it looks as though inhabitants are warehoused. As the camera focuses on various apartment units, we see that the TV set is prominently placed in each and every dwelling, and that it is on in every unit as well, depicting some image. The audience registers these people and their TV sets, and the feeling the imagery creates is that these apartment denizens are blissfully unaware of the world outside their windows. And yet they believe themselves connected to that world because an appliance—a TV set—is activated. The long pan across these living units raises a few questions. What images or terrors are coming into the world over there? In *that* apartment? Or the

the next one over? The impression is that Samara's tape may not be alone in its transmission of pain and suffering.

Later, Rachel's sensitive son Aidan (Dorfman) watches Samara's tape and Rachel is furious at this transgression. The pictures on the television have exposed him to images that she wasn't prepared for him to see, and that are dangerous to his psyche and could, literally, do him grave harm. This scene explicitly trades on a parent's fears that the airwaves may not be safe for children's eyes. In the post-9/11 world, the film reminds its viewers, you can't leave a kid alone in the front of the TV, because you just don't know what he or she will see. Far from being the "babysitter" of a previous generation; *a safe generation*, the TV now is a portal through which children might see any number of real-life horrors.

On top of such visual flourishes, the film's main character, Rachel Keller (Watts), is a journalist, a person responsible for what type of "news" reaches the rest of the world. When, during the film's finale, she pushes the copy button and then passes the horror onto someone else, without comment or explanation, Rachel commits a technological crime of sorts. We expect her to be responsible and moral, given the public trust she holds, but *The Ring*, again suggests that those in the media are ultimately untrustworthy gatekeepers. She sends out information that is, simply, murderous. She is the gatekeeper for millions of psyches and without a thought she has passed on damaging visualizations. A child, like Aidan, by contrast, is trustworthy, and at film's end he asks the question that Rachel willfully ignores: "What about the person we show it to? What happens to them?"

Mr. Morgan (Brian Cox), Samara's father, also reserves a high degree of hatred for journalists, as he says to Rachel. "What is it with you reporters?" He queries. "You take one person's tragedy and force the world to experience it ... spread it like sickness." Again, the audience is left to ponder the nature of contemporary news, and the phenomenon of 24-hour news stations on cable TV. Fox, CNN, and MSNBC jump on a popular story and ride out, regardless of the human or personal toll that such reporting exacts. Much in the way that, a generation earlier, *Poltergeist* (1982) critiqued television as a portal of evil, *The Ring* thus positions the new shape of television and media, circa 1999–2002 as a technological and inhuman monstrosity. This idea is expressed in several scenes which show important action either transmitted on or reflected by the television set. Over and over, the film depicts compositions of characters watching screens, a fact which indicates the importance of that "act" in our modern culture. At one point, we even get a shot with a big screen/little screen dynamic for Rachel and Aidan. They are joined in the act of watching something inappropriate.

Importantly, Samara, it is reported in the film "*never sleeps*." Do you know what else never sleeps?

A 24-hour cable news channel on TV.

Even the near-ritualistic repeating of Samara's tape in the film seems to reflect the nature of modern mass media. A viewer can check in on CNN every two or three hours and find it replaying the same footage, the same imagery, the same "breaking news" reel. This was true, as well, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, shortly before *The Ring* premiered in theaters. A nation's trauma was recorded, broadcast and rerun day after bloody day, over and over again, and those who saw it felt authentic fear and real trauma even though they were safe, and lived thousands of miles away from Manhattan, or Arlington, VA. The culture of fear touched them and hurt them, even though they were not in immediate danger. The suffering of the few was spread "like a sickness" and a virus of fear was released into the world at large. That virus, eventually, became the Iraq War, a war that would never have occurred had the media not been complicit in drumming up a culture of absolute, pervasive fear after 9/11.

Steely and silver in color palette, *The Ring* thus reveals a world in which people—despite all the connection provided by telephones and television—feel isolated from one another. Noah and Rachel barely talk, and Noah is unwilling to step up as Aidan's father. "I don't think I'd make a good father. Maybe it was because my own was ... such a ... disappointment. Thing is, I don't want anyone else to do it, either, be your father," he notes. In other words, Noah doesn't seem to truly be living, but rather existing in a kind of half-paralyzed, half-awake state. He wants to be a Dad and he doesn't want to be a Dad. He has a job to tend to after, after all: looking at screens all day. Similarly, Rachel doesn't listen to Aidan's teacher, or to Aidan's worries about death, and Samara's mother committed suicide. Taken all together,

this world is a dark place where love seems subdued, but personal traumas spread like wildfire, chain-mail style, via “the tape” and TV monitors. Samara’s brand of evil also fits the film’s organizing principle, of suffering transmitted to many, like a disease, by modern technology. The last thing Samara sees is a “ring” around the well where she is trapped, and yet a “ring” is also the description of the sound a telephone makes. The phone rings when Samara reaches out to warn her tape’s viewers of their impending demise. A “ring” is also a synonym for a circle or loop, and news footage of tragedies are often discussed in terms of being “looped.” Samara may be physically dead, but her suffering keeps transmitting via phone ring, and via the ring or loop of the tape itself. And this is precisely how she wants it.

“Everyone will suffer,” she insists. In modern culture, and thanks to technology, everyone can experience one person’s suffering. And as often as they would like.

The Ring establishes a new paradigm in the American horror movie involving *culpability*, and that too is part of its artistic gestalt. In the 1980s and 1990s, “vice preceded slice and dice.” That turn-of-phrase means, simply, that the victim pool in horror movies often brought on their own deaths by breaking moral taboos. They smoked weed, had premarital sex, or snorted coke. This paradigm was seen in the slasher formula of the 1980s, but also the Interloper formula of the 1990s, wherein quasi-respectable white men (think: Timothy Hutton in *The Temp* [1993]) broke “the rules” to get ahead in his profession, only to see the blow-back destroy his family and reputation. But films like *The Ring*, *The Grudge* (2004) and *Pulse* (2006), suggest something different. They imply that the very act of being present, of *watching or seeing* is enough to warrant the wrath of angry spirits or individuals. In a hyper-connected, globalized world, the act of watching is enough to doom you. Knowledge of a crime itself becomes the crime. Once you see the “the crime,” you are culpable for it, a fact which is reflected in the photographs of the impacted in *The Ring*. Everyone becomes a hideous monster on film because they have “seen” Samara’s tape. They are now carriers of the disease, of the sickness that is spreading, according to Mr. Morgan.

Horror movies are often accused of coarsening the culture or showcasing imagery that is somehow damaging to a society. *The Ring* makes the reverse case. Consider: horror movies are rated appropriately and reflect aspects of the society that created them. They are fictional works of art that are about violence in the culture, and how that violence affects people. TV news, by contrast, is not safely bounded within an artistic framework or a regulatory one. So, while the horror film can comment meaningfully on the culture, the media, in its “fair and balanced” reporting, can actually damage it. It just puts the images out there and leaves it to “you” [to] “decide.”

The Japanese original, *Ringu* (1998), is a remarkable film too, with some big differences from the American version. There, the mystery of the island involves a volcano, not horses. And the Noah figure, Ryuji, boasts psychic abilities, which helps when contending with Sadako, the film’s version of Samara. But perhaps because it was designed for American audiences, *The Ring* seems much scarier and on-point about technology than its Japanese predecessor does. Both are great horror films, for certain. In particular, the structure of *The Ring*, originated in the Japanese film, is clever because it doesn’t reveal the true horror of Samara’s behavior until after Rachel has solved the mystery. Until Noah becomes Samara’s victim in the film’s last moments, we have seen only snippets of her activity, mainly the gruesome corpses she leaves behind. Thus, for the duration of the movie, we can only imagine how, precisely, Samara’s tape is murderous. But then, all that coiled-up, sustained energy is released in the climactic scene with Noah, and we get to watch Samara’s emergence from the TV—as a ghost and as a ghost signal—virtually uninterrupted. There are few moments more genuinely disturbing in the American horror cinema of the early 2000s than Samara’s escape from the television. Perhaps Samara’s water-logged form, long-hair and herky-jerky “digitized” movements have been aped so often now as to render them ineffective. But at the time of the film’s release, Samara’s ascent from the well and the TV set was a valedictory moment in the horror genre; the moment when the next generation of terror techniques and principles arrived, and a new paradigm was born.

The Ring also develops well the notion of inevitability, of a “ring” of repeating events. You see the tape, and then you see the images of the tape in real life, until, finally, you meet Samara and she kills

you. Accordingly, imagery from the tape including a ladder, a running blood-red, a fly, and an oval mirror, all recur progressively during Rachel's investigation. The question becomes: were they already there, or are they a side-effect of Rachel's vision; of her life re-shaping to the imagery that Samara has forged from her mind?

The Ring is an unnerving and disturbing film, made more so by the fact that it very much considers how we live in the 21st century, and wonders about all the images that we have transmitted and committed to the ether. Could they come back to haunt us? Have they already harmed us, and are they slowly killing us?

Signs ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"...there are moments in the film so terrifying it's necessary to note. There are a lot of people who were disappointed by *Signs* for its lack of conventional horror components and evident religious undertones—and this is fair. *Signs* is not scary because it utilizes tradition. It's scary because it finds fear in our homes—and from the very beginning. His children are not safe in their own backyard, their pets are no longer the warm, friendly companions they once knew, and the sound of the wind chimes is ominous instead of comforting."—Jane Budowski, *Decider*: "*Signs* at 15—The Scariest Alien Movie Ever?" June 29, 2017.

"Too much attention may be called to notions of luck, miracles and probability (a pompous Shyamalan, via his extended cameo, evokes an all-knowing god) but the comings and goings of the film's visitors are fascinatingly and purposefully shrouded in mystery. From his comic-book-panel pulpit, Shyamalan speaks of people so disconnected from their inner spirits (their torments, their families) that they seek enlightenment only in times of crisis. What with all the pre-packaged scares and affirmations, Shyamalan apes the Scriptures to good measure, creating a New Age horror flick that's as earnest as it is eye-rolling."—Ed Gonzalez, *Slant Magazine*, July 30, 2002.

"Besides being a suspense thriller, *Signs* also wants to ponder the nature of faith. It does this by separating people into a simple binary—those who have faith and don't believe in luck or coincidences, and those who feel we're all alone and life is meaningless. At the center of this binary is Graham, who used to be a reverend but lost his faith after an accident. It's a simplistic dichotomy and one that might offend the agnostics in our midst, but I found it to be an effective theme within a compelling movie. But lest I paint *Signs* as some somber meditation on life and death, I should also add that it's genuinely funny (much more than *Austin Powers 3*), and the humor arrives just when it's helpful. Shyamalan's pacing is extraordinarily assured, and the film never flags."—J. Robert Parks, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, July 24, 2002.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Mel Gibson (Graham Hess); Joaquin Phoenix (Merrill Hess); Rory Culkin (Morgan Hess); Abigail Breslin (Bo Hess); Cherry Jones (Officer Paski); M. Night Shyamalan (Ray Reddy); Patricia Kalember (Colleen Hess); Ted Suttton (SFC Cunningham); Merritt Weaver (Tracey Abernathy); Lanny Flaherty (Mr. Nathan); Marion McCorry (Mrs. Nathan); Michael Showalter (Lionel Prichard); Kevin Pires (Brazilian Birthday Boy); Clifford David (Professor); Rhonda Overby (Sarah Hughes).

CREW: Buena Vista Pictures, Touch Stone Pictures, Blinding Edge Pictures and The Kennedy/Marshall Company present *Signs*. Casting: David Aibel. Production Designer: Larry Fulton. Costume Designer: Ann Roth. Special Effects: Animal Makers, Industrial Light and Magic. Music: James Newton Howard. Director of Photography: Tak Fujimoto. Film Editor: Barbara Tulliver. Producers: Frank Marshall, Sam Mercer, M. Night Shyamalan. Executive Producer: Kathleen Kennedy. Written and Directed by: M. Night Shyamalan. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 106 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Pennsylvania, an ex-reverend, Graham Hess (Gibson), mourns the death of his wife in a

meaningless accident. Six months have passed, and he feels alone, and confused, much to the sadness of his brother, Merrill (Phoenix) and children, Bo (Breslin) and Morgan (Culkin). Soon, however, Hess must attempt to shake off his pain, because something strange occurs. In the corn field behind his farmhouse, a strange crop-circle has been carved by unknown and possibly malevolent forces. As TV news reports soon indicate, such crop circles—navigational aids, seen from space?—are being detected all over the planet. Before long, a fleet of strange lights are detected in the sky over Mexico City. Is Earth being invaded by aliens? And if so, how can a despondent Graham summon the inspiration and strength to save his family when he can't even save himself?

COMMENTARY: M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs* (2002) is a horror movie that concerns a very human, very grounded subject: perceptual sets. That's a fancy way of describing *sight*. We all choose, based on our perceptual baggage or sets, how we interpret events in life, and then we see and comprehend life according to the limits or boundaries of that particular perceptual set. At times, we actually erect perceptual *barriers* that preclude us from clear vision, either out of fear, suspicion, or even grief. In some cases, that perceptual set is dictated by selective exposure, the common tendency to expose one's self to information that merely reaffirms existing attitudes, even if the data contradicts the facts. Accordingly, a key moment in the Shyamalan film involves a lengthy monologue by the protagonist, who describes two kind of people in this world, and their particular perceptual sets. One brand of people doesn't have faith, and believes they are alone in the world, that there is no help when danger arrives. The other sort of people have faith, and view their lives through that perceptual set. These folks believe that when push comes to shove, they are not alone. They are loved and looked after. Someone stands beside them; perhaps God.

The key protagonist in *Signs* is Father Graham Hess (Mel Gibson), and he is a typical M. Night Shyamalan protagonist in the sense that—much like Malcolm Crowe, David Dunn, Elijah Price or Mr. Heep—he has fallen off the intended trajectory of his life. He is off course from his true destiny. Because of this, he is both sad and rudderless. He faces each day with despair and emptiness instead of hope and promise. Specifically, Hess is a man who has lost his faith because of the tragic death of his wife in a meaningless car accident. He can no longer bring himself to believe in a kind, loving, shepherd-like God. All he sees is a universe that rolls the dice.

The film's narrative drags Hess from this starting point of despair and nihilism because he can't see his purpose anymore, to a point where he can, finally, “see” a form of universal order again. Hence Graham overcomes, at great difficulty, the perceptual barriers that he has erected. But he does so only when he recognizes the “signs” that a greater force is looking out for him; only when aliens arrive on Earth to threaten the human race, not to mention his family. At this juncture, Graham finally sees the world beyond the barriers he has created; when he chooses to acknowledge a perceptual set, a way of seeing that changes his mind and restores his faith about God.

Signs features a number of images that reinforce the notion of perceptual sets or baggage, and the barriers they can create for the percipient. In short, those barriers prevent people from seeing important things. For example, the film features a preponderance of shots involving windows on the Hess farmhouse. The book-end visuals of the film feature a window too (facing the backyard and corn field). The inaugural shot of the film focuses on this portal, specifically. It is a barrier of wavy glass; distorting the imagery beyond. The picnic table, hearth (a symbol of family) and other objects appear wrinkled, unreal, *untrue* to what they should be when viewed through this pane. This portal is a direct metaphor for Graham's sight at this point in the film. He is seeing the world, but in a twisted way.

Then, at the end of the film—after Graham's awakening—that same window is seen once more. This time, however, it is broken, meaning that life can be seen accurately “through” without distortion. The waviness is gone. Notice also the darkness/light differences of these book-end shots. Early on, Graham is aimless in gloomy night. By the film's end, it's a new day. Another way to put it: Hess has metaphorically punched through that windowpane, overcome his perceptual baggage, and found his true meaning or destiny once more. The windows and other barriers in the film serve as our “tell” that

this story concerns the distance Graham has created from his true self, and the impediments he, himself, has created to seeing things in the way that, perhaps, he should.

Many critics you might say, have erected their own perceptual barriers when it comes to a film like *Signs*. They ask questions about the nature of the aliens and their invasion, instead of focusing on M. Night Shyamalan's visual expression of his theme; that our "truth" is dictated, in large part, by our perceptual sets and barriers; by what we select to see and acknowledge. We all look out on the world through windows, both invisible and not, and they don't show us the truth; they show us our *interpretation* of it; what we have already chosen to "see."

The highest aesthetic in film is to match a good theme (like the one noted above), with a trenchant, reinforcing visualization of it. That's this author's perceptual baggage, one can conclude. A film's imagery or symbolism must reflect or augment that which the story tells us. *Signs* absolutely achieves this apotheosis, and more than that, is a beautiful and arresting film—visually and narratively—about opening oneself up to a new or different way of seeing.

Now, some viewers might see the film as something else: a story explicitly re-affirming the mystery of faith. That's fine too, if that's how you lean. Yet *Signs* is primarily a film about finding your purpose and overcoming the perceptual luggage you haul around with you on a daily basis. It's not so much that you must have "faith," it's that you open your eyes to the "signs" the universe is putting out. If you're closed down, shut-off, lost in your own anguish, you are not open to such signs.

The following are the two themes that appear most often in Shyamalan films: The first involves protagonists bereft of purpose; seeking their place in an unsettled or disordered universe. The second quality is some commentary on the art of storytelling itself. Although the latter factor is less pronounced here than in other Shyamalan films, *Signs* makes a point about it too. At various points in the story, the Reverend Graham stops to tell his beloved children stories about how they were born; their origin stories, as it were. "*Tell me the story of when I was born,*" Morgan says at the height of the movie's alien invasion. Why does he ask for this? Because there is predictability and comfort in a story you know well: in a story you've been told many times. We may see the world through a set of perceptual baggage, but sometimes that baggage also fulfills a purpose. It grounds us. It humbles us. It tells us who we are, or who we can be. And Graham, certainly, must undertake the task of remembering who he really is, in the course of the film. He remembers Morgan's story, but he has forgotten his own.

In his stories, Graham contextualizes the children—Bo and Morgan—in terms of their beginnings on this mortal coil. Stories are another way that we, as human beings, get to know people, or, oppositely, pigeonhole them. Stories tell people where they come from, and who they are; or who we think they are. So, our perceptual sets include the stories we have heard all our lives, and *Signs* plays delicately with this idea. At one point in the film, the audience even sees a drawing of a farmhouse much like Graham's in a UFO book ... as it comes under attack from alien ships in that illustration. This drawing suggests another important "sign" to interpret, a story of "truth" outside the selective exposure (self-reinforcing ideas) mentioned above in regards to Graham's world view. He comes out of his bubble of long enough to realize, "*gee, that looks a lot like our house....*"

Dazzling, scary and affecting on a pure human level, *Signs* is a home run, and mostly because it pinpoints a symbolic way for audiences to experience and understand the Reverend Hess's journey. We all peer through our individual windows and judge life in our own way. What if that way is wrong? What if we're missing signs all around us?

Otherwise, *Signs*, is about two things: *windows and the television sets*. In a way, they're the same thing; they're connected. A TV set is actually a window of sorts. Much of *Signs* involves the idea of seeing through distorted lens, and that's what the aforementioned "wavy" window to the backyard represents. But that's what the TV is too. Throughout the film, the camera watches the family's TV set in close-up, insert shots as news breaks of strange crop circles, lights in the sky, aliens, and alien invasion.

In the post-9/11 world, how viewers relate to images on TV is a significant idea. Are the aliens a hoax? Can we trust our eyes? That's a key question in the film, because Graham clearly does not trust his eyes. He knows of Bo's obsession with water glasses, for example, but doesn't see how it is relevant. He also knows of Merrill's success in baseball but doesn't understand his wife's comment to "see" and for

Merrill to “swing away.”

These are, in a way, perceptual clues like those featured on the TV; ones that can initially be dismissed or judged a hoax, or even unimportant. To put it another way, Graham has some evidence of signs throughout the film (like the familiar farmhouse in the UFO Book) that there is a kind of synchronicity occurring in his life, but he writes it off as unimportant, or as fake. He has selected the idea that life is meaningless, so he omits from his view anything that could be meaningful. He selects *not* to believe. It's a very complex equation, and yet consistently applied throughout the film.

Even when the alien first invades Graham's house, the being is first seen as a reflection on a television, as a view through a portal or window of sorts. Perhaps this visualization occurs because of the film's ultimate viewpoint that everyone “sees” the world through windows, accurate or false (like the wavy bedroom windowpane). Before the movie makes the audience face the alien—who has chameleon-like qualities and thus can deceive sight—it sees him on the TV, the box through which millions look out to see the whole, wide world.

Why introduce the alien in the house in this way? Perhaps because this image is a reflection of how we see everything, through a particular lens. And perhaps to remind audiences that TV is not a reliable narrator. We think what we see on TV is real, but news programs don't always have all the facts, or have all the facts *right*. Graham's journey in *Signs* is about acknowledging the interconnection of his family, too. He has retreated into isolation and despair and isn't really present for his children when they need him. There are many shots included in the film where the audience witnesses this separation in terms of visualization. At one point, Graham sits on a staircase, separated from his brother and children and nearby the bannisters. They might as well be prison bars. They visually acknowledge the distance he feels from his loved ones, and that they feel from him.

Oppositely, Graham and his family get closer to the truth, it appears, when they are close; when they are connected and work together towards common cause. There's an immensely creepy scene in the film early on during which Graham, Merrill, Bo, and Morgan form a human chain—touching hands and arms—and it is only then, when they are as one, that they get a clear signal on the baby monitor of the alien speaking. Again, the visuals enhance the film's story in a remarkably deep way here. Graham thinks he's alone, and wallows in despair, and when he is separated from his family, they feel it too. But when the family works together—when it toils towards common goals—pieces of the puzzle start to fall into place.

Critics who dismiss *Signs* outright are simply not acknowledging or reading the visuals, not understanding how this story of overcoming perceptual baggage or barriers is imagined in terms of how Shymalan sees and asks his audience to see. Everything one needs to know about Graham's heroic journey is encompassed in the pictures, in the visuals of the film. The visuals reveal his distorted vision. They register his separation. And they show the audience resolution, his rejoining with his family.

It is understandable that people complain about *Signs*. These good folks are disturbed by the fact that the aliens don't have technology, are stopped by wooden barricades and doors, and choose to attack a planet rich with water when it is harmful to them.

Most of this criticism is hooey.

The film never truly provides an examination of the alien culture. Indeed, that would be a different story all together. The film reveals that the aliens want to take humans and preserve the planet itself, so its resources are available to them. These points of exposition explain the simple reason they attack without technology, or even wearing armor. They land on Earth and use only “ground tactics,” according to the film's dialogue, fearing a nuclear reprisal. Is it so hard to believe that aliens would be blocked by the same conventions that block us, another form of biped? We also can't break through wooden doors and locks, either. But the silliest complaint about the film involves water. Why would the aliens come to Earth, a planet rich in water, if it is harmful to them? Well, again, the answer is the same: they've come to take humans. Humans live on Earth, both far from and near water. One might similarly ask of *War of the Worlds*, why would aliens invade a planet with so many germs that might kill them? Why didn't the Martians pick a different planet, either? In both cases Earth is available and valuable. It possesses life and resources. That is why it is a point of ambush and siege in both stories.

Similarly, the aliens are never seen invading near bodies of water in the film. A graphic on television actually reveals the opposite, actually. On a news program a map of India is displayed, and the crop-circle locations are pinpointed. Notice that the markings are all inland, miles from water. It's true that India is surrounded by water on three sides, but those pinpointed locations have no bodies of water near them. So, the aliens know that water harms them, but that they can still attack humans in places not near bodies of water, especially population centers.

Why didn't they factor running water into their equation? Again, tell me why the Martians didn't count on germs in *War of the Worlds*? Aliens are from a different place, and understand us, perhaps, as well as we understand them. Why do all movie aliens have to be omnipotent? Where is it written that this must be the case? How omnipotent about conditions on the grounds was the U.S. when it invaded Iraq? Who is to say the alien invasion in *Signs* isn't the galactic corollary of that notorious "Mission Accomplished" banner.

Signs succeeds as a work of art in another significant way. It builds suspense efficiently and relentlessly. It also features two of the greatest jump scares of the early 2000s. In the first one, Graham looks out Bo's window at night, and is surprised to see a monster of some sort staring back at him. The sudden appearance of that thing will send cold shivers down your back. But the view is so quick and startling that it fits in well with the movie's theme of sight. Suddenly, we're not so sure of our eyes. Did we really see that? The second jump scare scene is truly terrifying too, though in a more overt way. Graham's family watches news footage on TV, captured at a birthday party in Mexico City, of an alien stepping out into plain view. This shot is beautifully set-up and executed. Shyamalan films it found-footage style, meaning it feels immediate and real. Yet the effects also hold up incredibly well. There is a malevolence and *character* in the stride of that monstrous thing as it comes into view and lingers there. There is disdain on its features as it pauses to acknowledge it has been seen. It just doesn't care. In an under-cover way, the alien appearance and personal facade also fits in with the fallible alien theory stated above. Overconfidence and superiority—hubris—might be a quality of these beings, at least based on the way they attack the Earth, and venture into populated territories.

Moments such as these are orchestrated with an eye towards maximum impact and prove again that if Shyamalan wanted to operate on the simple basis of jump scares or rollercoaster ride-style horror storytelling, he could easily choose to do so. But pretty clearly, that kind of superficial terror doesn't interest him.

What does interest him? Lost souls.

People who have wandered off the path and can't find their way back. These poor wretches are trapped in the metaphorical woods by their perceptual baggage, and that's the key point to understand. They can't see beyond a narrow viewpoint to realize they can achieve their destiny. The assumptions they carry with them are wrong, and they don't find out this fact until the denouement occurs, and the pieces come together.

Given such a reading of the film, *Signs* doesn't have a trick ending. For the duration of the picture, Graham Hess sees through a barrier of wavy glass. He can't see the whole picture. Then, when the signs are acknowledged, he punches through that window, that perception of reality, and in floods the sunlight of belonging, meaning and hope. *Signs* is really the story of a man stepping into a larger world than the one he believed he existed in, told in unimpeachable visual style.

There are two kinds of people, as Graham would tell us at this juncture. You can be the person who sees this movie and decides that it's simply about aliens who can't open doors and get hurt by water. Or you can be the kind of person who opens himself up to the storytelling and symbolic imagery. You can register the movie as a deep and often profound look at the way humans see and don't see the important things around them.

As always, it's your choice. But I'm in the second group.

"The film captures its actors and the surroundings in a lush way. One particular editing technique he uses is the quick cuts when emphasizing an actor's emotional reaction. When Madison is rejected, he cuts between her slightly varying wounded glares. It works. Unfortunately, the film still falls into the same tired clichés set by much better predecessors"—*Hollywood.com*, October 16, 2002.

"Without delivering chills or suspense, it reiterates the old message that cheating is fine, unless you happen to choose a psycho."—Michael Philips, *Citysearch*, September 6, 2002.

"Squandering every opportunity to flesh-out the film's underlying tensions (the class differences between cello-playing rich-girl Madison and dowdy waitress Amy seem to have been thrown in as an after-thought), *Swimfan* dives headfirst into the deep end of sexual obsession and drowns all subtlety in the process."—Jamie Russell, *BBC.com*, September 17, 2002.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jesse Bradford (Ben Cronin); Erika Christensen (Madison Bell); Shiri Appleby (Amy Miller); Kate Burton (Carla Cronin); Clayne Crawford (Josh); Jason Ritter (Randy); Kia Joy Goodwin (Rene); Dan Hedaya (Coach Simkins); Michael Higgins (Mr. Tillman); Nick Sandow (Detective Zabel); Pamela Isaacs (Mrs. Egan); James DeBello (Christopher Dane); Phyllis Somerville (Gretchen).

CREW: Twentieth Century-Fox, Greene Street Films, Cobalt Media Group, Furthur Films and Forrest Films present *Swimfan*. Casting: Amanda Harding, Mindy Marin. Production Designer: Kalina Ivanov. Costume Designer: Arjun Bhasin. Music: Louise Febre. Director of Photography: Giles Nuttgens. Film Editing: Sarah Flack. Producers: Joe Caracciolo, Allison Lyon Segal. Executive Producers: Fisher Stevens, Tim Williams. Written by: Charles Bohl, Phillip Schneider. Directed by: John Polson. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A promising high school swimmer, Ben (Bradford) sees his aspirations imperiled after he cheats on his faithful girlfriend, Amy (Miller), and has sex with a newcomer in town, Madison (Christensen). Madison quickly becomes very possessive about Ben and stalks him. When he attempts to end the relationship with him, Madison goes to extreme lengths, including framing him for murder, to win him back.

COMMENTARY: One of the most common horror movie monsters of the 1990s, the interloper, returns in a 2000s horror film that feels very much like a hold-over from the Clinton Era. *Swimfan* is a relatively well-made film, but also, in light of cultural changes since the 1990s and early 2000s, one that seems pretty despicable in terms of the gender roles it presents and asks its audience to believe.

Consider, Ben is the great white (male) hope of his high school, not because he is smart, decent, or hard-working, but because of his athletic ability. Ben has a history of acting irresponsibly, and has a track record with illegal drugs, for example. Then, in the film he cheats on his girlfriend, Amy, after acknowledging he wouldn't have had success in school without her. He is on his way to college in California, after high school and tells Amy, "*I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you believing in me.*"

Then, he cheats on her without batting an eye, and has sex with Madison in the pool. Of course, that was his decision, wasn't it? No one made him do it.

He is a victim, apparently, of his own penis.

Contrarily, the movie depicts Madison as a total nutcase, one who serially stalks and destroys men like Ben, but for no real reason other than that she is "movie crazy," meaning that the movie simply dictates that she be psychotic, so audiences can identify with Ben's situation.

In short, this movie boasts a narrative that is pure bullshit.

It retells a gender myth our society has told itself for decades, over and over again. It goes like this: Men are victims, even when they are the ones who act badly and initiate bad behavior like infidelity, or casual sex. But women who engage in sex, rather than being seen as human beings, are mere psychos.

who can utterly destroy the male's aspirations to succeed in his career, studies, or relationship.

Isn't it a terrible inconvenience, that, after fucking in the pool, she should desire a relationship with Ben?

Isn't it awful for this promising white male that, after cheating on his dedicated girlfriend, his aspirations to go to college and be an athlete might be threatened by his own poor decisions and behavior?

Again, the plot is pure male fantasy, and one that American culture has accepted and repeated for far too long, without question. The underlying message is that men should be able to treat women how they want, when they want, with no repercussions to their lives, or consideration for the women they mistreat. The movie stacks the deck by attempting and largely failing to make Ben the object of audience sympathy, and transforming Madison into the most psychotic, spurned lover since Glenn Close boiled Michael Douglas's bunny in *Fatal Attraction* (1987).

At times, the film's tunnel vision is truly astounding. After cheating on his girlfriend, Ben's swimming performance begins to suffer, and the movie treats his inability to perform (ahem) as Madison's fault as well. In short, nothing at all is Ben's fault, and the tragedy that must be avoided for this poor, privileged white male is that his future athletic and academic aspirations are threatened.

"You're just coming on a little too strong," Ben tells Madison. "You didn't think I was coming on too strong in the pool," she replies.

Objectively, who's telling the truth in that exchange?

Despite the antiquated and one-sided nature of the film's characters and situations, *Swimfan* absolutely conforms to the interloper paradigm set out in 1990s horror films. The first convention of this paradigm is that *we're all accountable*. In this type of film, the protagonists commit a moral transgression that sparks the activities or interest of the interloper. Here, Ben is unfaithful and has sexual intercourse with Madison, thus activating her long-standing psychosis.

Convention 2 is "What's your childhood trauma?" In other words, the seeds of interloper psychosis stem from the past. Here, Ben learns that he is not the first man that Madison destroyed, and goes in search of that past, to learn more about her m.o.

Convention #3 is that big problems start small. This is the one aspect of the film that actually updates the formula. The title of the film, *Swimfan* comes from Madison's internet handle, Swimfan85. The interloper's stalking has no gone digital, as she messages Ben on the net, incessantly. The messages start out as innocuous, but then progress towards danger territory.

Finally, the last convention of the interloper format is that "*your life is up for grabs*." Once the target of the interloper behaves badly, professional and personal lives are threatened. The relationship threatens the protagonist's standing in the larger world. In this case, Madison goes to Ben's volunteering gig at the hospital (which he is only doing to get into the school he desires to attend) and switches out the medicine he gives to an elderly patient. That elderly patient nearly dies, which makes Ben look irresponsible. She also switches out his urine test, so it comes back positive for steroids, jeopardizing his position on the swim team, and any future admission at college. He is even framed for the death of Josh (Clayne Crawford), which threatens his very freedom.

It is possible to admire the performances in *Swimfan*, and also its adherence to what is now a well-known sub-genre, or format in horror. By the same token, one can deride the fact that it sets up a straw man (or woman) villain, who has no real reason to go nuts except the movie requires it of her. It also asks for audiences to identify with someone who have benefited from every imaginable privilege in life and still behaves poorly. Audiences are asked to invest in Ben's future, and thirst for Madison's death.

In an age when horror films were recognizing the lack of equity in male/female relationships, the film is a startling throwback to more traditional, conservative mores. Madison might as well have been named Eve, and then audiences could have blamed her for Ben's ejection from the Garden of Eden too.

28 Days Later ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"The setup is gruesome enough, but Boyle's visual habits are those of larky black comedy, and you cannot hope to horrify unless you learn to linger—to pause patiently while monstrosity looms. From the start, Boyle and his editor, Chris Gill, chop and chivy the images along, and they don't even realize that, when Jim calls for help in a desolate London, he is actually crying out for a slow tracking shot. The one thing in *28 Days Later* that got to me was the opening sequence, in which we meet the laboratory chimps who initially harbor the disease. One of them is strapped to a chair and forced to watch clips of human folly—fights, beatings, and other common malignities. Here is a dreadfully ripe and pessimistic thought: Did the chimps become infected by a dose of concentrated mankind? Could we be wiped out by the virus of ourselves?"—Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*, June 30, 2003, pages 102–103.

"Boyle isn't the most original filmmaker. But at least here he has found a situation worth stealing: tapping into the man-becomes-God situation where we can remake the world in our own image. Shot digitally, the movie has a grainy, documentary immediacy. A *Blair Witch* shake, rattle and roll. Boyle tells the story with an edgy verve, showing us what the chimps in that research facility are watching on TV in the opening—chaotic news footage of riots, wars, mayhem and death."—Roger Moore, *Orlando Sentinel*, June 2003, page 20.

"There are many good things to say about *28 Days Later*, but the most important thing to recognize is the debt it owes to John Wyndham, a name that's unfortunately fading in modern times, but you know who he is. Wyndham wrote *The Midwich Cuckoos* and *Day of the Triffids* and all but invented a genre, a kind of disaster provoked by a science-fiction event.

The opening of *28 Days Later*, someone waking up in a hospital who needs to find out why nobody's around, is basically the opening of 'Day of the Triffids.' As much as people may look at this film as riffing on George Romero's territory, we're in Wyndham territory here. But social commentary, that's the Romero element that *28 Days Later* embraces—this is not just a zombie film. Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* novel is also not without social commentary. And for Romero purists, *28 Days Later* features fast-moving, or running, zombies—Dan O'Bannon's contribution to zombie lore from *Return of the Living Dead* and really put on the map by *28 Days Later*.

What's really striking is the opening in deserted London streets in the days before CGI could cheaply erase them. The absence of people as a practical effect was undoubtedly a logistical nightmare (allegedly shot in 45-minute stretches in early morning sessions where small areas could be closed off).

The tone of Danny Boyle's film is consistently bleak. Images of a single light in a large apartment building are eerie in that these are things we seldom see (except perhaps in the middle of the night) but illustrate isolation in a particularly poetic way.

28 Days Later is a stepping-stone, bridging Romero's classics with a classic that Edgar Wright would deliver later on, but as far as making its world believable, Boyle knocked this one out of the park. It's particularly hard-hitting at the military mindset that would try to control a situation like this."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Cillian Murphy (Jim); Naomie Harris (Selena); Brendan Gleeson (Frank); Noah Huntley (Mark); Megan Burns (Hannah); Christopher Eccleston (Major Henry West); Christopher Dunne (Jim's Father); Emma Hitching (Jim's Mother); Alexander Delamere (Mr. Bridges); Kim McGarrity (Mr. Bridges' Daughter); Alex Palmer, Bindu De Stoppani, Jukka Hiltunen (Activists); David Schnedier (Scientist); Toby Sedgewick (Infected Priest); Luke Mably (Private Clifton); Stuart McQuarrie (Sergeant Farrell); Ricci Harnett (Corporal Mitchell); Leo Bill (Private Jones); Junior Laniyan (Private Bell); Ray Panthaki (Private Bedford); Sanjay Rambaruth (Private Davis).

CREW: 20th Century-Fox, DNA Films and the UK Film Council present *28 Days Later*. Casting: Gail Stevens. Production Designer: Mark Tildesley. Costume Designer: Rachael Fleming. Special Effects: Clear, Creature Effects, Moving Picture company, The Reel Eye Company. Music: John Murphy. Director of Photography: Anthony Dod Mantle. Film Editing: Chris Gill. Producer: Andrew Macdonald. Written by: Alex Garland. Directed by: Danny Boyle. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 113 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Animal rights activists break into a secret laboratory in Cambridge to free the animals, including chimps, undergoing cruel experimentation there. This incursion goes terrifyingly wrong, however, when the activists are bitten and attacked by the infected animals. A contagion of red-eyed “rage” spreads across England. Twenty-eight days later, a man named Jim (Murphy) awakes in a hospital to find that the world seems to have ended during his coma. He finds London an abandoned city, save for packs of the fast-moving, scarlet-eyed infected. Fortunately, Jim is found by two survivors, Selena (Harris), and Mark (Huntley), who explain to him how civilization came to an end, and all civic infrastructure quickly collapsed. Mark is killed while Jim tries to contact his parents, at their home. Afterward, Selena and Jim find two additional survivors, kindly Frank (Gleeson) and his young daughter, Hannah (Burns). Together, the group hopes to reach a blockade near Manchester, where a radio transmission reports that the “*answer to infection*” has been discovered. The rag-tag group commences its long journey, and the first hurdle is a tunnel filled with the infected. When the group finally reaches the Manchester blockade, however, it finds West, and a military outpost teetering on the very edge of insanity.

COMMENTARY: The new, 21st-century era of zombie films officially kicked off in 2002 with Danny Boyle’s visceral horror film *28 Days Later*. Not coincidentally, the film also kicked-off the *post-9/11 horror film format revival*, in the process depicting a world of urban chaos, confusion, and infrastructural collapse. In a way, *28 Days Later*’s “timeliness” was but a coincidence: the film was actually *in production* when the 9/11 attacks occurred in America, though it was released afterwards, as the War on Terror Age ramped-up. Still, it’s amazing and more than a little disturbing how much of the film’s searing, apocalyptic imagery calls viewers back to that bleak, devastating Tuesday in September of 2001. At one point early in the film, for example, a confused, lonely hero stumbles upon a *bulletin board for the missing and lost*, a near ubiquitous sight of post-9/11 news and entertainment in the States.



Jim (Cillian Murphy) awakens from a month-long hospital stay to find that London appears abandoned in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002).

Although *28 Days Later* does not actually feature zombies, but rather people infected and driven mad with “rage,” the film certainly inspired the fast zombies of horror films that premiered later in the decade. For some horror aficionados, this fact is not necessarily a good thing, but the blindingly fast ghouls of *28 Days Later* remain surprising, dangerous, and terrifying, even today. There’s no narrative or thematic reason why these monsters should be slow, since they aren’t technically “dead.”

Thematically, *28 Days Later* remains worthwhile for two artfully vetted thematic strands. The first involves the specific nature of the blood-borne “rage” virus: it appears to emerge from constant exposure to TV news imagery. The movie thus serves as a critique of the then new age of the 24-hour news cable cycle, which thrives by constantly ginning up outrage and resentment, and by providing a constant diet of upsetting, grotesque imagery. The Boyle film thus makes an implicit link between “exposure” to television news and “exposure” to disease, or more specifically, madness.

Secondly, and on a far more human level, *28 Days Later* succeeds because it concerns the way that humans can adapt to the worst possible conditions, apparently with ease. And in this case, adaptation is not necessarily a good thing. In particular, there’s one character here, Selena, whose mantra is “*staying alive is as good as it gets*,” and who has turned off all her emotions, empathy, and compassion so as to survive in the terrifying new world order. Further down that continuum of inhumanity the film depicts a soldier named West, essayed in a charismatic, dominating performance from Christopher Eccleston, who is willing to dispense with his humanity all together if it means he can hold on to power. These characters are contrasted in the film with the central protagonist: a sensitive, skinny, unassuming guy named Jim (Cillian Murphy) who believes that the way to survive in this horrible new world is not by short-circuiting humanity, but by living up to its best ideals, even if, in some circumstances they could be interpreted as dangerous, or as “luxuries.” The film’s central debate involves this conflict between those who see survival as paramount, and those who see humanity during a crisis as the issue at hand.



Jim outruns an infected carrier—on fire—in the intense *28 Days Later* (2002).

As *28 Days Later* opens, unlucky chimps in a laboratory are subjected to a variation of the Ludovico Treatment from *Clockwork Orange*. They are forced to endure non-stop images of rage, discontent, rebellion, war, chaos, murder, and madness on the television. The underlying message sent by this imagery is that modern civilization, at least as represented on the nightly news is *toxic*, and that constant exposure to it on the 24-hour cable news cycle can cause deleterious effect on the psyche, making one feel prone to inescapable feelings of helplessness, resentment, and anger. Consider, for example, Fox News: a 24-hour manufactured-rage machine that, in turn, manufactures new rage in its loyal viewers. Some have termed the long-term effects of watching Fox News as something akin to brain washing, though torture is also a good analogy.

The film's images tell another, perhaps more subtle story as well: Rome is burning, and everyone is too busy passively watching the images of violence on the television to glean the real, bigger picture that such rage is imperiling civilization itself. This was an idea of tremendous currency in the opening years of the War on Terror Age. Films such as *The Ring* (2002) also concerned this notion. There, the videotaped suffering of one girl, disseminated to strangers, was enough to render the "watching" strangers culpable in her pain, and result in their deaths just a week after the initial viewing of it.

There are actually two ideas—and seemingly contradictory ones—roiling under the surface. One involves the idea that TV broadcasting around the clock, showcasing images of destruction and death, is having a harmful effect on society as a whole. The other interpretation is that corporate-sponsored news knowingly feeds the citizenry the bread and circuses they desire in the form of these graphic reports and stories, thus numbing people, overall, to the horrors of war and so forth. And when people are numb, they'll put up with a lot more war and suffering. What the documentary or news images featured in *28 Days Later* make plain is that, all over the world, people are hurting each other, fighting one another, and locked in cycles of perpetual violence. This constant strife is what creates the "rage" in the bloodstream. It is the thing that makes the blood boil, and turns human beings into unfeeling, murderous monsters.

Connected to this idea is the fact that this apocalypse only speeds up a process *that had already begun*. When faced with a country-wide catastrophe on this scale, the key to survival is erroneously perceived by the likes of Selena and West as even *more* cruelty, even more violence, even more harshness. Only Jim, a character who has slept for a month and therefore been exposed to no rage on TV or in the streets, sees that the cure to violence is not more violence; that the cure to inhumanity is not more inhumanity. Throughout the film, he and Selena debate this very question. Is living what matters? Or is it *how you live* that makes the difference? If Jim and Selena stop to help Hannah and Frank, will the family just "*slow them down?*" Or is helping Hannah and Frank a simple human responsibility that must be honored, regardless of the consequences? Is it "human" to kill a person who might be infected in the span of "*a heartbeat*," or does human decency require that before resorting to violence, one takes a breath and considers the evidence of "infection?"

These are not small questions, and so *28 Days Later* involves the very thing that makes us human: the ability to think and reason, and to care for those around us who are in pain. Mankind universally has two roads ahead of him. He can be barbarous because he feels the situation warrants it, or he can outgrow his barbarism and act humanely. *28 Days Later* handles this subject matter in a surprisingly nuanced way. In the film's last act, for instance, Jim must go "native" and kill West's soldiers to free Hannah and Selena from rape, sexual enslavement, and worse. Is he succumbing to "the rage?" Or has he reasoned out that this is the only path open to him if he hopes to prevent further exploitation and abuse?

In this case, the latter viewpoint is the correct one. Although they possess the means to protect people, West and his soldiers willfully abuse those means. The military men are as sick, in their own way, as the film's zombie creatures. They have abandoned all sense of human dignity, all to survive. By contrast, Jim fights to *preserve his ad-hoc family*, and more than that, to preserve Hannah's childhood and innocence. It is clear that the soldiers plan to rape her and Selena on a serial basis. Although it is perhaps schmalzy to write it this way: Jim ultimately kills for love while the soldiers kill out of fear, and the zombies kill out of unfettered, unstoppable anger. Jim's fight is one against the odds, but one with an

undeniable pro-social purpose: to reunite and free his new family and to put an end to a regime of utter cruelty and sadism. Also, Jim learns that only England is infected, and that there is a larger, sane world out there, a world they *can* reach. This element of “hope” permits him to face down the barbarians who are interested only in survival at all costs.

After all the violence and death, the film ends with that very idea of hope. Jim, Hannah and Selena are rescued, and, in visual terms, they literally turn “Hell” into “Hello,” in a signal they have built on the landscape. The phrase “Hello” is a greeting to civilization, and a sign of a new, fresh beginning.

In a way, West was telling the truth: the answer to infection was there, at his barracks. It was not in soldiers, and guns.

It was not in survival at all costs.

The answer to infection was in the restoration of human compassion, and the consideration of the ties that bind people to one another. The antidote to rage is always more love, not less, and *28 Days Later* is a worthwhile horror film not only because it is terrifying and heart-wrenching, especially regarding Frank's tragic demise, but because it makes this pro-social point in an entertaining and ultimately uplifting fashion. The film set off a zombie boom at the cinemas, to be certain, but few of the follow-ups could make a claim to having the same sense of heart—not to mention the energetic zeal—as Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*.

Wes Craven Presents *They* * *

Critical Reception

“In *They* we never see the creatures, but we know from their outlines that they're big and insect-like. They click when they move and roar when they eat. We know the horror-movie gobble sound. We've seen this movie before, and so has Wes Craven, who has made a few of them and mocked them, too, with his *Scream* movies. Why Craven should want to attach his name to this film is more mysterious than anything in it.”—Mick LaSalle, *San Francisco Chronicle*: “They Aren't Craven Enough,” November 29, 2002.

“Or *Wes Craven Presents: Some Film I Got Paid to Endorse*. In fact, Craven's name doesn't appear anywhere in the credits of the film otherwise known as *They*. That's fitting, too, since even the worst Craven-directed movies have a lot more going for them than this painfully familiar bit of oogum-boogum”—Keith Phipps, *The AV Club*, December 6, 2002.

“*They* is this year's apparent last gasp of a horror film. *They* is pretty lame. *They* looks like *They* was made for the bottom half of a double-bill at a drive-in that no one told the filmmakers had closed 25 years ago.”—Ken Hanke, *Mountain Xpress*, December 4, 2002.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Laura Regan (Julia Lund); Marc Blucas (Paul Loomis); Ethan Embry (Sam Burnside); Dagmara Dominczyk (Terry Alba); Jon Abrahams (Billy Parks); Alexander Gould (Young Billy); Desiree Zurowski (Mary Parks); Mark Hildreth (Troy); Jonathan Cherry (Darren); Peter Lacroix (David Parks); Jessica Amlee (Young Julia); Jay Brazeau (Dr. Booth); L. Harvey Gold (Professor Crowley); David Abbott (Professor Adkins); Jodelle Ferland (Sarah).

CREW: Miramax, Dimension Films, Focus Features, Radar Pictures and Good Machine present *Wes Craven Presents They*. Casting: Anya Colloff, Jennifer Fishman Pate, Amy McIntrye. Britt. Production Designer: Douglas Higgins. Costume Designer: Karen Matthews. Special Effects: Patrick Tatopoulos Designs, C.O.R.E. Digital Pictures. Music: Elia Cmiral. Director of Photography: Rene Ohashi. Film Editing: Chris Peppe. Producer: Scott Kroopf. Tom Engelman. Executive Producers: Ted Field, David Linde. Written by: Brendan Hood. Directed by: Robert Harmon. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: One night, a little boy, Billy, begs for his mother to save him from the monsters in his

bedroom. She doesn't, and something terrifying drags him out of his bed. Twenty years later, Billy (Abrahams) is a depressed, drug-using adult. He calls a friend, Julia Lund (Laura Regan), to a diner to meet with him and confides in her that the monsters from his childhood have returned. He recommends she stay in the light, and then commits suicide. After Billy's death, Julia, and Billy's friends—Sam (Embry) and Terry (Dominczyk)—meet with her, and report that they are also experiencing a return of their childhood night terrors. Soon Julia experiences this phenomenon as well, even though her boyfriend, Paul Loomis (Blucas) tries to convince her that she is only experiencing stress related to her schoolwork. Julia goes back to her childhood therapist, Dr. Booth (Brazeau), to see if she can help uncover the truth about these monsters. But when Billy's friends begin to die, Julia knows he was right: that the monsters have returned ... and want to take her away.

COMMENTARY: The umbrella franchise title "*Wes Craven Presents*" promises a lot but doesn't often deliver. *Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster* (1997) for example, is a fun rubber-reality horror movie that seems imported directly from the late 1980s era of *Hellraiser* (1987). Contrarily, *Wes Craven Presents Carnival of Souls* (1998) is one of the worst horror movies ever made. This film—*Wes Craven Presents They*—occupies the middle space between those two poles. It isn't fun at all, but nor is it a jaw-dropping train-wreck. Being of more recent vintage, *They* at least *looks* good, even if the script and characterizations can't quite keep pace with the cinematography. Except for the poorly rendered and dated CGI monsters, this Roger Harmon film at least looks of a piece with other genre films from the same time period—the early 2000s—including *The Mothman Prophecies* (2003) and *The Ring* (2002).

Alas, *They* is not frightening or effective, like those efforts. It's a bit muddled. The film apparently went through extensive testing, re-shooting, and even had an alternate script, at one point, so one suspects such creative disruptions are the cause of the film's maddening vagueness. This author enjoys a good, ambiguous or mysterious horror film as much as anyone, but there's no "there" in *They*. Nothing seems to connect, make sense, or build to any meaningful conclusion.

The idea underlying the film is good, however. Basically, *They* is all about psychology, and childhood trauma. Those things that scare us as children, the movie warns, return in adulthood, causing depression, isolation, and even suicide. Other people can't see or detect these "monsters," but the percipient is always aware they are there, right at the edges of periphery. That's not a bad, general template for a horror movie, though not an overly original one, either. *They* meaningfully ruminates on its core concept, of childhood monsters coming back, a few times, but basically functions as a series of not-terribly-effective or intriguing jump scares that lead, finally, to a baffling and unsatisfactory conclusion.

The opening scene of *Wes Craven Presents They* hits the trifecta of childhood fears. Young Billy must contend with a thunderstorm, a closet door that won't stay shut, and a monster hiding under the bed. These are the specters all children contend with, and the landscape, indeed, of the bedtime or night-time ritual. *They's* prologue is effective and creepy and succeeds in one very profound way: It reminds viewers what it feels like to be "*five years old again*," as a character notes later in the action. I was not prone to nightmares as a child, but I always had to sleep with my closet door shut, and I would cower under the bedcovers during thunder and lightning storms. I still recall one night, after a long trip away from home, when I saw strange lights dancing on the wall of my bedroom and became terrified that they were sinister. I had to call for my Mom to help. One composition in *They*—of a toy shadow moving on the ceiling—reminded me of that occasion. As children, we don't truly possess the necessary governing mechanism to always control these fears of what lurks in the dark, or under the bed, or inside the closet, so *They's* opening is fertile territory for a horror film.

One thing that stands out about the meticulously paced and orchestrated first scene is how uncaring and unconcerned Billy's mother seems by his terror, especially in the face of his comment that "They" are in the dark waiting for him. She is just a blank slate. She is mildly comforting, but mostly seems to not want to be bothered. One has to wonder if this lack of caring, or help, for that matter, is the childhood trauma underlying all the aforementioned bedroom/night-time fears. What these things, the

creature under the bed or in the closet, seem to be really be about the fear of being alone, of being in the dark with no one to help. At one point, Billy cries out for his mother and she doesn't answer.

The creepy prologue is probably the high point of *They* because it establishes a nice alternate reality. In this cinematic world, childhood night terrors are real. Monsters are hunting and taking children from their bedrooms for some dark purpose. The rest of the movie doesn't really work because the audience never learns that purpose, alas. It never even gets a hint of it. Why are Billy, Julia and the others selected in childhood for abduction? What makes them special? If they are abducted as seen in the prologue as children, why do the monsters send them back to our world and come for them again in adulthood? What's with the wait time? And if the monsters want these particular people so badly, how come they don't instantly grab them once the young adults have entered their domain? One scene reveals Julia wandering into another dimension, where the monsters lurk and wait. But they don't attack her for a few minutes. They don't even notice she's there. They don't seem interested in her at all, a fact which goes against the idea of tagging and retrieving certain people. If they are tagging and marking their victims as the film makes plain, these monsters might at least notice when their victims happen into close proximity. Instead, the monsters seem sleepy and quiescent at first.

Although an attempt is made to link the monsters of *They* to the folklore of the incubus, it seems half-hearted. Incubi and aliens are often linked to night terrors, it's true, but the monsters of *They* seem to boast a complex *modus operandi* that those mythological beings do not; one including capturing, releasing, tagging and abducting. Accordingly, *They* functions better on a metaphorical level than it does on a literal level. The kids who experienced such traumatic night terrors grow up to be terrorized. Billy—described by Paul as “*permanently freaked out*”—has sought out drugs like Prozac and battled depression to contend with his demons. Sam has become a morbid painter, creating huge black canvases of nihilist art. And Julia seems in denial about her past, at least at first, but everyone suspects she is having a psychotic break from reality. Issues like abandonment, perhaps, from their youth, have returned to spoil their adulthood.

And things not handled in childhood have a way of coming back, affecting the present, don't they?

The monsters are therefore the personification or manifestation of such unresolved issues. But again, as much as one can read all this psychology into the narrative, the plain fact is that the movie doesn't provide *literal* explanations or motives for the creatures. They aren't well-delineated in terms of their behavior, either. We see hints that they possess technology, for instance (in their tagging “darts”) but again, their behavior in the dark world makes them seem more like animals than beings with distinct motives and the capacity for reason or intelligence.

After the scene in which Billy establishes the rules—that the creatures hide in the dark, affect lights, phones, and power, and that crying children serve as a kind of an early warning system—*They* hits the skids, featuring numerous encounters with the monsters, but no real rhyme or reason as to when, why, how, or where they appear to their victims.

Finally, what about the disposition of the victims? Why do the creatures take them in adulthood? What do they do to them once they have them? What finally becomes of those they abduct? There are no clues, and so *They* seems maddeningly vague at times. We know there are monsters in another dimension and that they tag kids and abduct those kids as adults. Anything beyond that is all speculation, and there aren't even good clues here to go by.

They fails too because the main character, Julia, as played by Laura Regan, is insipid. She is slow on the uptake, quick to panic, and irritating. Her boyfriend, Paul, is an unimaginative dullard, and one cruising on automatic pilot. His sole duty is to ignore and disregard Julia's stories of monsters terrorizing her. Sam and Terry show more life but exist mostly to form the movie's victim pool. And Sam's loft apartment looks imported straight from *The Ring*.

How can a starving artist can afford such digs?

When you throw in the lousy CGI monsters, *They* proves remarkably unsatisfying. Like *The Mothman Prophecies*, *They* features numerous God's Eye views of modern cities, with the camera peering straight down from a tremendous height. In *Prophecies*, these shots suggested a force “above” human sight and identification. Here, they add nicely to the feelings of isolation and abandonment.

Several times in the film, the audience also see newscasters discussing “rolling black outs,” and this is not only an historical reminder of the Gray Davis/Enron Era in the early 2000s that led to the election of the Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, but a sign that technology is being manipulated by the monsters so they can more easily access our world. Modern society, in other words, proves as neglectful as Billy’s mother was in the film’s prologue. There is no help for these people in childhood or adulthood. Nobody cares enough to actually prove helpful.

One can understand why the late, great Wes Craven would produce and present a concept like *They*. The notion of a group of people joined by their night terrors is highly reminiscent of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and the concept of psychological disorders appearing as “monsters” is also familiar from his film canon. But given the pedigree declared by its title, *They* should be more than a half-explained outline of a familiar story. It’s weird that a movie called *They* never decides, even for a moment, who “they” actually are, or what they want with their victims.

***Wishmaster 4: The Prophecy Fulfilled* (DTV) * * ½**

CAST: Tara Spencer-Nairn (Lisa); Michael Trucco (Steven Verdel); Jason Thompson (Sam); John Novak (Djinn); Victor Webster (Hunter); John Benjamin Martin (Douglas Hollister); Kimberly Huie (Tracy); Mariam Bernstein (Jennifer); Mandy Hochbaum (Shopper); Jennifer Pudavick (Waitress); Ernesto Griffith (Bartender); Cara Bisiak (Dancer); Darren Ross (Djinn); Eric Blais (Djinn); Jeremy Kozielec (Djinn).

CREW: Artisan Entertainment, Overseas Film Group, Paquin Entertainment Group and Blue Riders Pictures present *Wishmaster 4: The Prophecy Fulfilled*. Casting: Elizabeth Hayden-Passero, Jeffery Passero. Production Designer: Rejean Labrie. Costume Designer: Linda Madden. Director of Photography: Curtis J. Peterson. Film Editor: Marcus Manton. Special Effects: Mark Gebel, Ron Karkosa. Producers: Gary Hawsom, Giles Paquin. Executive Producers: Jeff Geoffrey, Jacqueline Kennedy. Written by: Alex Wright. Based on characters created by: Tom Atkins. Directed by: Chris Angel. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Three years after an accident leaves her husband, Sam (Thompson), paralyzed from the waist down, Lisa (Spencer-Nairn) works with a slick lawyer, Steven (Michael), to get a ten million-dollar settlement. Sam gives Lisa a gift he procured on E-Bay, which turns out to house the gem-prison of the trapped Djinn (Novak). The Djinn must grant the waker, Lisa, three wishes so he can free his brothers in the gem and goes about that task by taking over Steven’s form. Lisa’s final wish, however, that she could love Steven for who he really is (a djinn!) turns out to be a difficult one to make come true.

COMMENTARY: Although not a good film by any means, *Wishmaster 4: The Prophecy Fulfilled* is likely the best of the direct-to-video *Wishmaster* sequels. Again, that isn’t saying much, but the team who made this film, having cut their teeth on the third film, seem to have learned some important lessons. In particular, they don’t structure *The Prophecy Fulfilled* as a slasher-type picture, with the Djinn going about, granting the wishes and murdering, a random victim pool. One may remember that in *Beyond the Gates of Hell*, the Djinn took out a college admissions office clerk, for instance, which wasn’t exactly scintillating stuff. Here, instead, a pared-down cast and premise allows the filmmakers to actually tell a story of some interest.

In this case, the story involves Lisa and Sam, newlyweds beset by tragedy. Sam is paralyzed after a motorcycle accident and becomes a self-hating alcoholic, who takes out his self-loathing on Lisa. He fears he can no longer be the husband she needs, particularly in the bedroom, and is intensely jealous of Steven, and for good reason. Steven is clearly interested in Lisa. The Djinn enters the picture and begins to manipulate this love triangle for his own purposes. The movie’s horror sequences are mostly by-the-numbers, but the movie grows clever when Lisa’s third wish, that she could love Steve for who he really

is (meaning the hideous, otherworldly djinn) gives the titular monster pause. He realizes he is in an impossible paradox. How could a human woman love the monstrous, evil creature for who he really is, once she knows? Meanwhile, the other djinn demand he complete the wish, when he has no idea how to do so. The movie also throws in a “hunter” summoned by the Djinn’s escape from the djinn. In most movies of this type, such a character (think Reese in *Terminator*) is supposed to be a hero. In this case, the hunter’s job is simply to murder Lisa, the so-called “waker” so while he is working to preserve human life on Earth, he is as much as an antagonist to Lisa as is the djinn.

The movie is also a bit looser than its stodgy predecessor and attempts to have fun with the “be careful what you wish for” premise that informed the 1997 originator in the series. Here, for instance, a bartender wishes to be a “pimple” on an exotic dancer’s ass. “Granted!” the Wishmaster replies, and the bartender disappears from the scene to go, well, you can guess where.

It’s not Shakespeare, but the film is a bit more confident and less wobbly than its immediate two predecessors. In fact, the movie doesn’t cop out to attempt to provide a happy ending, by unwriting Sam’s motorcycle accident. He finds his confidence and helps Lisa fight the Djinn, losing his life in the process. At the end, Lisa looks back at her now-destroyed life, and can at least remember the times with Sam with some positivity. He died as the man she loved, fighting for her, instead of as the bitter, self-loathing man she had come to know since his accident.

Again, *Wishmaster 4: The Prophecy Fulfilled* is not going to win any awards for acting, special effects, or screenwriting. It is just a step up from the previous entries. The “prophecy” may not have been fulfilled in the story, but at least some potential of the original franchise is “fulfilled” here.

TIMELINE: 2003

January 28: During his State of the Union address, President Bush lays out his case for war against Iraq, even though it did not attack the United States on 9/11. His case: Iraq has not given up its weapons of mass destruction. He argues that it is also developing nuclear weapons. He states “*The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.*” This information is soon debunked and seen by many as an outright lie.

January 28: President Bush launches PEPFAR (President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), which is credited for having saved more than sixteen million lives in Africa and helping to significantly alleviate the AIDS epidemic.

February 1: The space shuttle *Columbia* disintegrates on re-entry in an accident that kills all seven crew members, including an Israeli astronaut.

February 15: As war with Iraq nears, mass anti-war protests break out across the United States, and across the globe. President Bush reports that basing his decision on protests is like “*deciding policy based upon a focus group.*” In this case, that “focus group” numbers, in America, over 345,000 people, protesting in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Colorado Springs, and Seattle.

March 6: In the lead-up to the war, Vice-President Dick Cheney suggests on *Meet the Press*

that Iraq's soldiers will greet invading American soldiers as "*liberators*."

March 13: John Yoo, of the Office of Legal Counsel at the Department of Justice, states laws related to torture don't apply to foreign combatants.

March 16: On NBC's *Meet the Press*, Vice-President Dick Cheney suggests that Saddam Hussein is "*reconstituting his nuclear program*." There is no evidence of this assertion.

March 20: The Iraq War begins, with U.S. journalists "embedded" with the troops. The U.S. launches its attack with a "Coalition of the Willing." Reporter Dan Rather states on the air that when his country goes to war, he wants his country to "win."

April 9: The U.S. takes control of Baghdad, bringing down statues of Saddam Hussein.

April 10: The Human Genome Project is completed.

May 1: Garbed in a flight suit, President George Bush triumphantly lands on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln* and, in front of a national TV audience, announces the end of major combat operations in Iraq. He stands in front of a banner that reads "Mission Accomplished."

July 3: An insurgency grows in Iraq, and President Bush directly challenges the foreign fighters on TV. "*Bring 'em on!*" he declares.

July 22: The bullet-ridden corpses of Saddam Hussein's sons are shown on American cable television.

August 1: The social network MySpace is launched.

September 13: Saddam Hussein is captured by U.S. forces during Operation Red Dawn, while hiding in a "spider hole" in Iraq.

September 29: The United Nations warns that avian or bird flu could kill up to 150 million people.

October 2: The Iraq Survey Group finds little or no evidence that weapons of mass destruction exist in Iraq. It concludes that Iraq actually had diminished its capability to produce such weapons before the American invasion.

December 19: After seeing what has become of Iraq and its dictator, Libya agrees to destroy all WMD.

Beyond Reanimator * *

Critical Reception

"A prison riot shifts the madness up a gear and leads to a wonderfully degenerate 30-minute final sequence that involves not only lotsa gore and f/x but also some genuinely surreal visual wit."—Jonathan Holland, *Variety*, August 4, 2003.

"...it's demented enough to please anyone wanting to see the continuing adventures of one Dr. Herbert West."—Chris Hartley, *The Video Graveyard*, May 7, 2004.

"If you thought Herbert West was a gift from H.P. Lovecraft, it wasn't. What about Stuart Gordon? Probably a little more than Lovecraft, but I'll still say 'No.' Brian Yuzna? Well, he certainly helped. At the end of the day, actor Jeffrey Combs is the consistent thread that makes the *Re-animator* films a consistent franchise. Each of the three films is different in its own way—*Beyond Re-animator* certainly has more of a Roger Corman feel than the two prior films. It's also a little less slick, perhaps a little less fun, not embracing the camp factor that Gordon and Yuzna had infused in the two prior films. But wait, Brian Yuzna directed this film as well. What happened? Hard to say. Thirteen years had passed. Some of the key actors from the prior two films, namely the late David Gale and the still-living Bruce Abbott, aren't in this film. CGI was now available for some effects, rather than the mind-blowing practical effects used in the first two films. Combs carries all of the weight this time, and any flaws in the film are not his—he makes Herbert West as fun as ever. Barbara Crampton and Stuart Gordon were very important elements in what made the first film work, and the middle film in the series, *Bride of Re-animator*, probably leaned too heavily on its kinship to a certain James Whale film.

This concluding (so far) film in the series takes itself a bit seriously, shows the signs of lower budget, perhaps some cheap European production values. Maybe the magic formula inside the syringe is growing a bit diluted here—it was exciting to hear this film was coming, but it was about as underwhelming as one might have expected. At some point I think it's important to realize how lucky we were that the first film was so good rather than complain about how the two subsequent films weren't perfect. There was much good will to expend from the first film and still is—if Jeffrey Combs made another *Re-animator* film, I'd still watch it. I would just hope it would be a little better than this film."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jeffrey Combs (Dr. Herbert West); Timothy Dean Mussett (Young Howard Phillips); Jason Barry (Dr. Howard Phillips); Esla Pataky (Laura Olney); Angel Plana (Kitchen Zombie); Santiago Seguera (Speedball); Lolo Herrero (Sergeant Moncho); Enrique Arce (Cabrera); Simon Andreu (Warden Brando); Joaquin Ortega (Office Falcon); Raquel Gibler (Nurse Vanessa); Daniel Ortiz (Winni).

CREW: Lionsgate Home Entertainment, Castelao Productions, Filmmax, and Via Digital present a Brian Yuzna film, *Beyond Reanimator*. Casting: Merce Espelleta, Louis Hammond. Production Designer: Llorenc Miquel. Costume Designer: Catou Verdier. Special Effects: Screaming Mad George, Inc. Director of Photography: Andreu Rebes. Film Editor: Bernat Vilaplana. Producers: Julio Fernández, Brian Yuzna. Executive Producer: Carlo Fernández. Based on characters created by: H.P. Lovecraft. Story by: Michael Tejada-Flores. Written by: José Manuel Gómez. Directed by: Brian Yuzna. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After serving more than a dozen years in prison, Dr. Herbert West (Combs) meets a new acolyte, Howard Phillips (Mussett), and re-starts his ghoulish work with a re-agent that can animate dead flesh. Soon, however, history repeats itself. Howard, who is in love with a reporter, Laura (Pataky), utilizes the re-agent illicitly after she is murdered by the prison's corrupt warden (Andreu). As a prison riot looms, West must navigate the love affair gone wrong, the attention of the warden, and a new crop of flesh-eating zombies.

COMMENTARY: How can a movie starring Jeffrey Combs as H.P. Lovecraft's Herbert West—and a sequel to the brilliant *Re-Animator* (1985) to boot—be this bloody lifeless? *Beyond Reanimator* is a straight-up re-telling of the original film's story, only with West in prison, and some years older. West is still the eternal optimist, and still toiling away when the audience encounters him, forever one step away from the breakthrough that will make the world recognize his genius.

Otherwise, the movie is pure rehash.

As one might recall, *Reanimator* is the tale of Combs' West working with another doctor (in the original, Bruce Abbott's Dr. Caine) at a university, to reanimate corpses. His competitor and nemesis in academia was Dr. Hill. In the original film, West's associate fell in love with Megan Halsey, who later died, and was re-animated. Here, only the locations and character names have been changed. West is in prison, not at Miskatonic University. His associate is Dr. Phillips, not Dr. Caine, and the doomed woman is Laura, a journalist reporting about the story, not Megan Halsey. Meanwhile, West's nemesis is the prison warden, not a fellow scientist. Sound familiar?

All the beats of the story are reruns, and thus highly familiar. Combs remains an absolute delight and a miracle worker, but even an Atlas such as Combs cannot support the weight of this dreary, warmed-over film for long. *Beyond Reanimator* lacks inspiration, ingenuity and surprise. The film is also obviously foreign-made and shot, which is fine, but laughably it is described as being set in Massachusetts. Worst of all, the title is a misnomer. This is a movie that can't go beyond *Reanimator*, as it is content to rehash it and repeat everything all over again. If *Bride of Reanimator* (1990) was *Reanimator* re-heated, this is *Reanimator* as a frozen entrée.

Herbert West is one of the great horror icons of the 1980s, for certain. The character, created by Lovecraft and given such unique voice and characteristics by the brilliant Combs, deserves a better story than one that audiences have already seen. The whole unspoken premise here seems to be that West always makes a little progress on his work, then is stymied and becomes part of a zombie outbreak. But his vision is never unfettered. His work is never taken to another level of scope or hierarchy. Imagine a *Reanimator* sequel in which West works for Big Pharma, with tons of research, and he can really run wild in his experiments, instead of being hamstrung by prison wardens, riots and other clichés.

It was, in a way, very important for *Beyond Reanimator* to be a good movie. In the 2000s, horror franchises such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Halloween*, and *The Hills Have Eyes* were all being re-booted in ultra-serious, ultra-gory incarnations. Camp and comedy were two factors not allowed in this new world. Instead, everything felt like it had to be grim and dark, and gritty. The world that gave rise to *Reanimator*, *Return of the Living Dead*, and *Fright Night*, seemed truly gone after 9/11. Horror fans needed a sequel like *Beyond Reanimator* to showcase how humor and horror could still work together and go hand-in-hand. But the film isn't funny, and it isn't scary, either. Nor is it a good character piece. The filmmakers needed it to help point out a different path for 21st-century horror, one that could permit for silliness and laughs to exist side-by-side with screams and seriousness. Instead, this film feels dated and old, and showcases why this approach doesn't work well in our modern day and age.

It's just not enough to bring back Herbert West for a third film (a second sequel, as it were) and pretend that the world, his world, hasn't changed or evolved. *Beyond Reanimator* needed to live up to the title and figure out how Herbert West could exist in the 21st century and still be meaningful, funny, and consumed by his terrible work.

Instead, we get leftovers.

*The Bone Snatcher (DTV) * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Scott Bairstow (Dr. Zack Straker); Rachel Shelley (Mikki); Warrick Grier (Karl); Patrick Shai (Titus); Andre Weideman (Kurt); Adrienne Pearce (Magda); Patrick Lyster (Johan); Brian Claxton-Payne (Creature);

John Higgs (Clive); Jan Ellis (Harvey); Langley Kirkwood (Paul); Lulama J. Nombiba (Old Man); Yusuf Hendricks (Taxi Driver); Andre Jacobs (Dr. Muller); Nikki Jackman (Mel).

CREW: Filmrise, Overseas Filmgroup, First Look Media in association with Imaginarium, Focus Films, Persistence Pictures Inc., and Zen HQ Films presents *The Bone Snatcher*. Casting: Stuart Aikins, Janet Meintjes, Chris Schamberger. Production Designer: Michael Slater. Costume Designer: Catherine Kukard. Special Effects: Gajdecki Visual Effects. Music: Paul Heard, Mike Pickering. Director of Photography: Andreas Poulsson. Film Editor: Richard Benwick. Producers: Izidore Codron, Malcolm Kohll, Koa Padolsky. Executive Producers: David Pupkewitz, Chris Roland. Written by: Malcolm Kohil, Gordon Render. Directed by: Jason Wulfsohn. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An American scientist, Dr. Zack Stracker (Bairstow), travels to Africa to work on a project, but quickly becomes enmeshed in the search for three missing prospectors who have disappeared in the Namib Desert. Along with his team, including Karl (Grier) and Mikki (Shelley), Stracker encounters a strange creature (Claxton-Payne) that kills people and steals their bones. Dr. Stracker's truck breaks down, stranding the team in the desert, and he soon must contend with a sandstorm, and the swarming, strange creature, which is described in the local folklore.

COMMENTARY: This one should have been a contender. *Bone Snatcher* might, with a little more ingenuity, have become another *Pitch Black*-styled creature feature set in a forbidding location, in this case a South African desert. Alas, *The Bone Snatcher* is lethargically paced, and overuses its aggressive editing techniques, particular slow-motion photography, to improve less-than-satisfactory footage. Even the depiction of the monster is poor on too many occasions. The result is an unimpressive and very slow-moving enterprise.

It all starts out so promisingly. Scott Bairstow, the star of Chris Carter's short-lived *Harsh Realm* (2000), plays a scientist, Stracker, who designs "*extreme survival systems*," and then is stranded, basically, in the middle of nowhere with a contentious, argumentative group of locals, in search of three missing miners from the Eland Mining Enterprise. The desert itself is almost a character in the film, and it is a great and picturesque location. There are many beautiful vistas in the movie, both by day and night, and the desert is described as "*too hot during the day and too cold at night*," meaning that it is no place for human beings for any length of time. It is here that the creature rears its head, and in concept, the titular bone snatcher is certainly interesting. In the words of one character it consists of "*bones that walk, flesh that disappears*." In one relatively effectively staged scene something inhuman seems to eat the flesh right off of its victims. When we look closely, we see a swarm of tiny black, coruscating mites. Or something. Basically, the idea is that the monster is a colony creature, a swarm monster with a queen that gives direction. Creepily, the bugs animate corpse bones, so they can be ambulatory, like people.

The preceding paragraph makes clear that the film starts strong: good actors, original monster, awesome location. But very shortly, this creature feature falls apart, like that black swarm scurrying apart, perhaps from a paucity of completed footage. Parts of the film seem unfinished, or poorly rendered. Just like *Pitch Black*, there is a kind of monster vision here, and that's fine and effective but the film also resorts to an ugly visual trope of the 2000s: *impressionistic flash cuts*. Sometimes these flash-cuts substitute, in the editing room, for transitions, or even establishing shots. The flash cuts are meant to be stylish interstitials tying scenes together, and yet they quickly become tiresome. The same is true of the film's slow-motion photography, which is utilized to inject some—any—kind of momentum into the action scenes, which clearly need tarting up. The whole movie seems to be stuck in molasses, despite all the solid ingredients.

Bone Snatcher attempts to deal with local folklore and generate scares through the bone snatcher's wearing of character's faces. Again, all these ideas are good, and should work, but the film, as though shot underwater, moves at such a deliberate pace that the desired outcomes—intellectual and jolting scares—don't materialize. Instead of a Bone Snatcher, the movie feels like a consciousness snatcher, and that is truly unfortunate.

Cabin Fever * * *

Critical Reception

"Filled with coarse comedy, flesh-eating contagion and back-woods mayhem, this impressively icky, witty scare pic from director Eli Roth combines the hillbilly-country horror of the first *Blair Witch Project* with the viral decimation and paranoia of *28 Days Later*. It doesn't have the is-this-real gimmick of the former, and it's not as good as the latter. But *Cabin Fever's* let's-throw-these-kids-in-a-cabin-and-freak-them-out scenario would make Sam Raimi—who threw five friends in a cabin in the original *Evil Dead*—proud."—Steven Rea, *Knight Ridder Tribune News Service*, September 8, 2003, page 1.

"Roth successfully highlights not just the fear of contagion but the way that paranoia starts to grip the non-infected and turns them into Darwinian survival commandos. A black comedy bubbles close beneath the surface, although the characterization isn't strong enough to distinguish it from the recent crop of hell-in-the-backwoods movies *Wrong Turn* and *House of 1,000 Corpses*."—Anthony Quinn, *The Independent*, October 10, 2003, page 7.

"It's got kids, it's got a cabin, it's got woods, it's got plenty of raspberry jam, but what it ain't got is a movie. It's just a loud, derivative grade-Z horror film of no particular distinction, and why it's generated some buzz at film fests is the real and only interesting mystery about it."—Stephen Hunter, *The Washington Post*: "*Cabin Fever*: A little buggy," September 12, 2003.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Rider Strong (Paul); Jordan Ladd (Karen); James De Bello (Bert); Cerina Vincent (Marcy); Joey Kern (Jeff); Arie Verveen (Henry); Guiseppe Andrews (Deputy Winston); Matthew Helms (Dennis); Richard Boon (Fenster); Dalton McGuire (Lemonade Boy); Jana Farmer (Lemonade Girl); Dante Walker (Shemp).

CREW: Lionsgate Films, Black Sky Entertainment Presents, in Association with Deer Path Film, a Down Home Entertainment and Tonic Films production, *Cabin Fever*. Casting: Joe Adams, Mitzi Corrigan, Ayo Davis, Paige Johnson. Costume Designer: Paloma Soledad. Production Designer: Franco-Giacomo Carbone. Music: Angelo Badalamenti, Nathan Barr. Special Effects: Director of Photography: Scott Kevan. Film Editor: Ryan Foley. Producers: Evan Astrowsky, Sam Froelich, Lauren Moews, Eli Roth. Executive Producer: Susan Jackson. Story by: Eli Roth. Written and Directed by: Eli Roth. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of rambunctious college buddies—Paul (Strong), Karen (Ladd), Bert (De Bello), Marcy (Vincent); and Jeff (Kern)—go on vacation to a cabin in the woods for spring break, unaware of the danger lurking in the backwater woods. The friends encounter and then kill a hermit by accident. Soon, they succumb to a deadly flesh-eating virus, caused by contaminated water in their remote cabin. The students grow terminally ill, one by one, as their flesh rots. Deputy Winston (Andrews) and other locals attempt to stop the sole survivor, a now-infected Paul (Strong), from leaving the area. At the same time, the infected reservoir is shown to be the source for a local water company, and a truck carrying infected water takes to the highway.

COMMENTARY: Tactless and gross, director Eli Roth's debut film, *Cabin Fever* is, knowingly, a nasty if highly effective bit of work. The caustic film features unlikeable, selfish characters facing a terrible no-win situation: a gruesome infection by a skin-eating disease. The film features numerous homages to horror films of yesteryear such as *The Evil Dead* (1983) and *Last House on the Left* (1972), but also resonates in a modern way. In light of the 2000-election and post-9/11 milieu, the film plays as a meditation on the purposeless and emptiness of modern American life. Why not be an unlikeable and selfish person in a world where your vote doesn't count? Why not be unlikeable and selfish in a world in which safety and security are revealed to be an illusion? The young caustic characters in the film, who pursue sex and drugs to the exclusion of other interests, represent a new and highly alienated generation; one that has seen how the values they grew up with don't matter. They understand the

matter plainly.

They are on their own.

At one point early in the action, the memorable composition from Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left*, "The Road Leads to Nowhere," is heard on *Cabin Fever*'s soundtrack. In that Craven film made in the turbulent seventies, the song was an anthem of personal loss and feelings of futility. The Collingwood family lost their daughter Mari to a brutal crime. The suburban mother and father then committed horrible violence against her murderers out of vengeance, but the road would still lead nowhere for them, despite their actions. Their "castle" (their homes, their lives) would "*stay the same*."

Trenchantly, "the Road Leads to Nowhere" serves a different if not entirely unrelated thematic purpose in *Cabin Fever*. It plays here as an anthem of disaffection, to the meaninglessness of life. Al Gore won the popular vote in the presidential election of 2000 by half-a-million votes, but he didn't take office. And once in office, George W. Bush acted as though he had won a "mandate" to run the country as a right-wing ideologue. Similarly, American citizens went about their lives on 9/11, only to lose parents, siblings, children, or even their own lives to a terrorist attack that no one saw coming.

Although the film was written before 9/11, this vibe of disaffection and the purposelessness of life is clear from the dialogue, whatever its original intent. "*It's like being on a plane you know is going down*," a character notes. "*We're all going to get it. We're all going to get sick*."

The next step beyond those statements is clear. If you know you are going to die, and soon, why wouldn't you be selfish about your needs and desires while you can, while you still live? Life is short, and we're all going to die. Here, a character, Paul (Strong) is more interested in having sex before he dies than his friends' lives. And instead of caring for the sick, the "friends" isolate the first sick one among them Karen, in a barn. To put her out of her misery, they beat her to death with a shovel.

It is also worth considering that the horror arises from the mistreatment of the hermit. After the teens accidentally set him on fire, his body ends up in the reservoir, and in their water supply. This is punishment for transgression, for certain, a familiar horror trope, but also the concept of blowback, which is familiar in the 9/11 milieu. Blowback is basically the idea that our bad behavior boomerangs against us in ways we don't perceive. Many Americans considered the 9/11 attacks to be an example of blowback from decades of imperialist American foreign policy, whether rightly or wrongly.

Here, the blowback is a direct result of the friends' behavior. They accidentally kill a man, and in death, he inadvertently kills them.

The acts are connected.

It is also impossible not to recognize that the poisoned water arrives through ignored infrastructure. A service that should help people (water from the tap) instead carries disease and death. Much debate in the post-9/11 milieu concerned the infrastructure of American intelligence, and the walls (and turf wars) between agencies. These agencies are meant to serve and protect American citizens, but the infrastructure failed; they did not do so leading up to the 9/11 attacks.

Another shot gets trenchantly at the films' commentary on the meaninglessness/absurdity of life. At one point, a dog is seen eating the rotting corpses. This shot tells us it is literally a dog-eat-dog (or dog-eat man?) world. Things like civilization, dignity, and empathy are meaningless in the new world order.

The Road Leads to Nowhere.

At times, the makers of *Cabin Fever* also apply a red filter to the action, to several shots, to suggest this dog-eat-dog world of blood-soaked behavior. Another piece of the puzzle involves the representations of authority, who are not interested in helping people, but who will die just the same (by drinking the infected lemonade). So, color *Cabin Fever* as a knowingly cynical horror movie about unlikeable characters in a hopeless situation. The horror in the film, and it is considerable, arises from the virus's impact on the human body. The disease is inevitable, and disgusting. For example, there is a scene in which a character shaves her legs, and she actually shaves off her own flesh, strips of it coming off in the razor. A scene of sexual foreplay also turns moist, but not from arousal, from the presence of the flesh-eating disease.

Like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Cabin Fever* is a road trip gone wrong movie, and one

with a sick sense of off-kilter humor as it relates to regional populations. In Tobe Hooper's film, a group of five friends took a detour into terror when they ran out of gas, running afoul of the mad (Southern) cannibal family. Here, the five friends take a similar detour, and encounter hostile, or at least non-friendly locales as well, even though the exact nature of the threat is different. Both films feature the trope of the Last Chance Gas Station too, the borderlands between normality and terror, the sane and the insane. The cabin setting of the film also evokes *Evil Dead* (1983), as does the intense focus on gore and body disintegration.

But Roth has not merely forged an homage here. Rather, he has synthesized all the elements of these beloved classics and put a modern, 21st-century spin on them. His effort may be considered mean-spirited and nasty (and both descriptions are accurate), but also one that understands the vibe of its time. The college students in his film are vain and selfish, and self-obsessed, and when push comes to shove, they turn on each other, and it's every man or woman for themselves. To amuse themselves they tell a story about a massacre at a bowling alley (visualized as a flashback), but don't see the irony when they end up in a "story" that seems just as disgusting. Their story—their end—is now for the audience's amusement, which lends the film a further reflexive or self-aware feel.

Make no mistake, *Cabin Fever* is not subtle. It is aware of how dumb it is. But it is, paradoxically, smart about that stupidity. It understands that the road has been leading to nowhere for a very long time, and that nothing, not even our personal apocalypse, is going to change that fact. Our stories of death and destruction are par for the course, and grist for the mill. But ultimately, society will learn nothing from them, and it will be right back to where it was before.

The castle stays the same.

Cold Creek Manor * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"Despite its predictability and funeral-march pace, *Cold Creek Manor* works a poisonous spell. That is a much more interesting kind of scare than watching yet another a bloodbath by yet another psycho jumping out of yet another closet with yet another glinting hatchet in hand."—Margaret A. McGuirk, *Cincinnati Enquirer*: "Psychological thrills at home in *Cold Creek Manor*," September 19, 2003, page W14.

"The nicest thing to be said for this new horror flick is that it's aptly named: The style is cold, the plot is creaky, and the cast is far too mannered. Dennis Quaid and Sharon Stone, both looking rather tired, are Cooper and Leah Tilson. These New Yorkers get so fed up with the stresses and strains of city life that they move themselves and their two young kids to the sticks. Specifically, they move into a fixer-upper with a ghastly past of which they are, at least temporarily, unaware. Soon they run into Dale Massie (Stephen Dorff), a handsome local whom they hire to help them refurbish the place. Leah takes a shine to Massie, even though it ought to be perfectly obvious to her that the guy is a total nut case. Can she really be this desperate? The same question might be asked about Mike Figgis, a talented director whose ambitious, sophisticated films include *Leaving Las Vegas*, *Miss Julie* and the flawed but fascinating *Time Code*. His participation in an impersonal muddle like this one is beneath him."—Joy Boyar, *Knight Ridder Tribune News Service*, September 16, 2003, page 1.

"The filmmakers and actors tried so hard to make a good, scary movie—and they failed so miserably. Every scene is filled with horror-movie clichés, from the facial expressions to the music (the happy tune that builds to drama). There is zero-character development, seemingly random action and pointless dialogue. I probably could have looked past all of this had the movie actually made me jump. Even once. But it didn't, and I almost laughed at how ridiculous the final climax is."—Jenni Ross St. George's, *Spokesman Review*: "*Cold Creek Manor*' pointless, not scary or suspenseful," September 29, 2003, page B7.

Cast & Crew

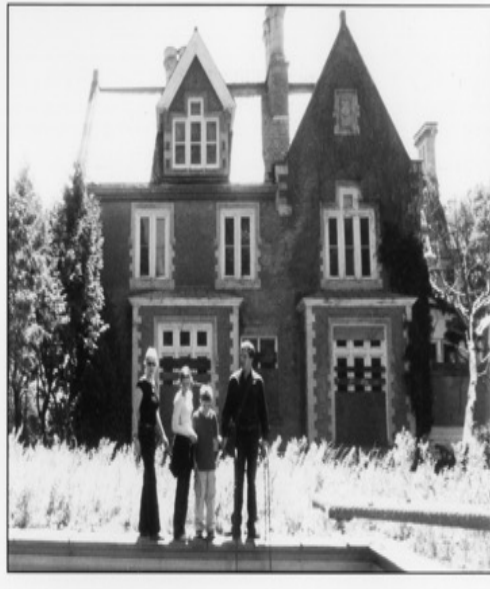
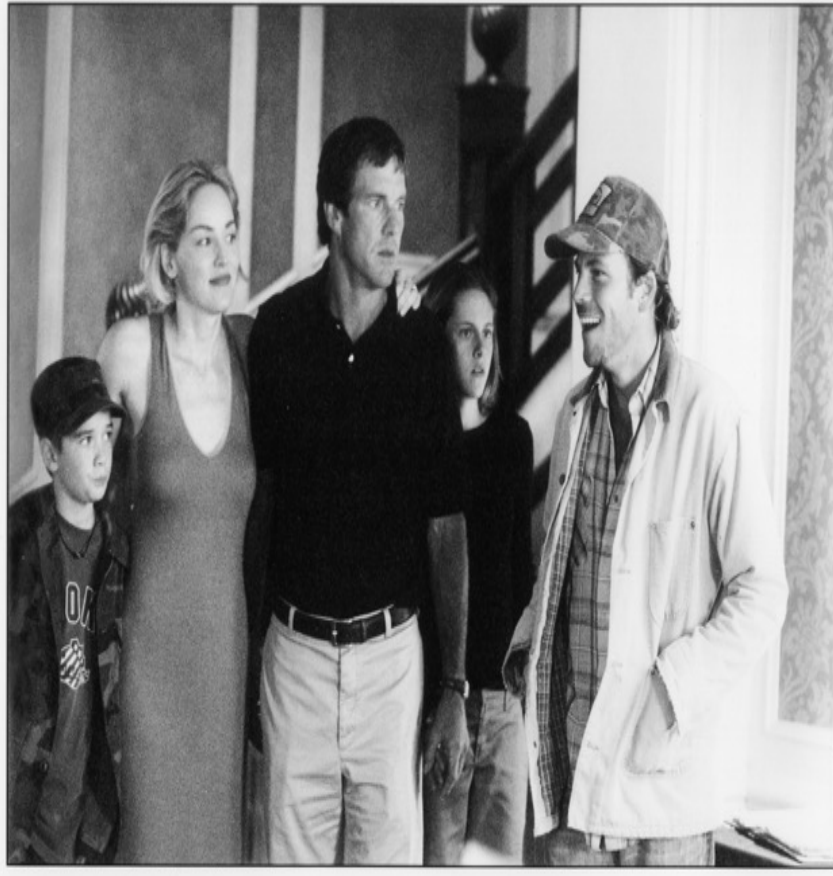
CAST: Dennis Quaid (Cooper Tilson); Sharon Stone (Leah Tilson); Stephen Dorff (Dale Massie); Juliette

Lewis (Ruby); Kristen Stewart (Karen Tilson); Ryan Wilson (Jesse Tilson); Dana Eskelson (Sheriff Ferguson); Christopher Plummer (Mr. Massie); Simon Reynolds (Ray Pinski); Kathleen Duborg (Ellen Pinski); Peter Outerbridge (Dave Miller); Aidan Devine (Skip Linton); Wayne Robson (Stan Holldan); Jordan Pettie (Declan); Ray Paisley (Dink); Shauna Black (Janice).

CREW: Touchstone Pictures Presents a Red Mullet Production, *Cold Creek Manor*. Casting: Cathy Sandrich Gelfond, Amanda Mackey. Costume Designer: Marie-Sylvie Deveau. Production Designer: Leslie Dilley. Music: Mike Figgis. Director of Photography: Declan Quinn. Film Editor: Dylan Tichenor. Producers: Mike Figgis, Annie Stewart. Executive Producers: Richard Jefferies, Lata Ryan. Written by: Richard Jeffries. Directed by: Mike Figgis. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 118 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A harried and financially strapped family, the Tilson's, leaves their expensive apartment in New York for rural Bellingham and a dilapidated country estate called Cold Creek Manor. The Tilson patriarch, Cooper (Quaid), decides to make a documentary about the Massie family, who lived in the estate, and left behind their family ephemera, including home videos. The house's former owner, a redneck and ex-convict Dale Massie (Dorff), is still bitter about losing the house to the bank but comes looking for a job on the property. He becomes the family's handyman, working on the house, but soon, things start to go wrong. A snake appears in the pool, and even in the Tilsons' bed. Convinced that Massie is dangerous, Tilson goes to visit his father (Plummer), who is hospitalized and on death's door, to learn more.

COMMENTARY: *Cold Creek Manor* (2003) may be a better remake of *The Amityville Horror* (1979) than the actual remake of *The Amityville Horror*. Like that tale, *Cold Creek Manor* is a tale about a haunted house. But this house is not haunted by literal spirits or ghosts, but rather the ghosts of the past. It is also haunted, importantly, by the social and economic movements of the films present day: the 2000s. It may seem odd to parse *Cold Creek Manor* as a horror film, not a thriller, yet it knowingly features all the conventions of the horror form of the 2000s, including a last chance gas station as the borderland between civilization and the frontier, cell phones that fail to function at critical points, and of course, a video camera testament to pathology and neurosis.



Three images from *Cold Creek Manor* (2003). Top: The Tilsons (left to right), Jessie (Ryan Wilson), Leah (Sharon Stone), Cooper (Dennis Quaid) and Kristen (Kristen Stewart), encounter their new handyman, the dangerous interloper Dale (Stephen Dorff). Bottom left: Dale (Dorff, left) proves handy by getting a snake out

of the pool while (from left to right) Jesse (Wilson), Leah (Stone) and Kristen (Stewart) watch in surprise and terror. Bottom right: The Tilsons (left to right, Stone, Stewart, Wilson and Quaid) in front of their new home purchase.

Cold Creek Manor also resurrects the most popular and oft-seen “monster” of the 1990s, the Interloper. That monster is one who sneaks into a family’s normal life and turns it upside down. But, importantly, the Interloper always possesses some motivation, some sense of (admittedly twisted) justice. The so-called “heroic” family here is, in fact, guilty of something, which creates shades of gray in the story. Films of this “Interloper” type proliferated in the 1990s and had titles such as *Pacific Heights* (1990), *Single White Female* (1991), *Cape Fear* (1991), and *The Temp* (1993).

Let’s compare Dale Massie, the Interloper of *Cold Creek Manor*, to the template this author set down in *Horror Films of the 1990s*. The first convention is “*we’re all accountable*.” This means that the protagonist of a film usually commits some transgression that sparks the Interloper’s activities. Here, the Tilson’s literally and metaphorically trespass into Dale Massie’s life. When they first view the manor, they let themselves in. They go in uninvited. And the house is still filled with the belongings of the former owners, including letters, video tapes, and photographs. Cooper, the Tilson patriarch, begins cataloging and organizing these materials to create a documentary about the family, without asking permission. Essentially, he rifles through Dale’s life, history, and childhood, with the intent of making a profit from the documentary he produces. That is presumptuous to say the least. It is fair to state that Cooper invites Dale Massie into his life by taking his familial house, and by taking his belongings and ephemera as well.



Three more images from the interloper film *Cold Creek Manor* (2003). Top: The Tilsons (from left to right, Dennis Quaid, Kristen Stewart, Sharon Stone and Ryan Wilson) escape to the roof when their house is overrun by snakes. Bottom left: Leah (Stone) and Cooper Tilson (Quaid) search the property of Cold Creek Manor for

hunts about its dark secret. Bottom right: Leah (Stone) holds on for dear life in the final confrontation with the interloper in their midst.

The second convention of the Interloper film this author called “*What’s your Childhood Trauma?*” Basically, the psychosis that makes the Interloper so dangerous is born out of that person’s bad childhood, which may include abuse. Here, of course, Dale contended with a tyrannical father. His Dad has always resented Dale, even referring to him (to his face) as “*the corrupt spawn*” of a “*whoring mother*.” The third convention is that “*Big Problems Start Small*.” In other words, the Interloper’s dangerous activities begin with little things, warning signs that are ignored. Here, Dale visits for dinner with the Coopers and belches at the table and cajoles Cooper into giving him a job on the estate. Then, he starts behaving badly, depositing snakes in the swimming pool, or in Cooper’s bed. From there, the infractions escalate. Before that happens, there’s the death of a family pet, a necessary precursor to violence against the human members of the family in many Interloper movies.

The last convention of Interloper film is what this author termed “*Your Life is Up for Grabs*.” In this case, the interloper threatens to move in and replace or eliminate the protagonist, taking their identity or life in some way. Here, Dale is out to get his house (now the Cooper’s house), sleep with Cooper’s wife, and win over the Tilson children. He “un-mans” Cooper by proving better at home repairs and renovations than the patriarch is, so that his family comes to see Dale, at least initially, as a savior. He is the one, after all, who removes the snake from the pool. Alas, metaphorically, he is the snake in the pool, or the snake in the bed.

Beyond conforming to the Interloper formula popularized in the 1990s, *Cold Creek Manor* makes a devastating economic argument. Dale can’t keep a house that has been in his family for some time, because of expenses, because of his history as a convict. The Coopers, a white family that wants to flee city life for the suburbs, is able to take it right out from under him. It possesses the economic resources that he doesn’t. The Coopers don’t know how to restore or take care of a property like Cold Creek Manor, and Dale does, yet the Coopers are the owners. This is an economic battle of the haves vs. the have nots, in many ways, and is reminiscent of *Wendigo* (2000). Basically, Dale represents Red America: under educated, under employed, and angry about the way things have gone. The Coopers represent blue America, affluent, urbane, and in some sense viewed with suspicion and condescension by the locals, as depicted in the film’s restaurants and at the gas station. The great foreclosure crisis in America had not yet come when this film was released, but certainly *Cold Creek Manor* is about that idea. It’s about banks taking away homes—family homes—and selling them at cheaper prices to folks who, ironically, the original owners would consider, “interlopers” themselves.

What is this story really about? It’s about people who don’t have money, being in houses they can’t afford, but come to think of as “home.” Then, when economic times are bad, they can’t stay in that home, and, not surprisingly (and not without reason) feel betrayed by the American dream. Weren’t they supposed to go into debt to be a part of what President Bush called the “ownership” society?

Cold Creek Manor is not a great film, nor even the best interloper effort of the 2000s. The material wears thin since the film runs so long (at nearly two hours), and the story is rather predictable. At some point the audience finds itself ahead of the movie and its characters. However, *Cold Creek Manor* actually seems to be about something meaningful and relevant in the culture, unlike, for, example, the empty-headed *Amityville Horror* remake. The film seems to note that our perfect houses—our pools, our appliances, our master bedrooms, even—have snakes lurking nearby. These snakes in the grass are the secret underneath in a culture where the rich have grown richer, and the poor have grown desperate.

In an interesting twist of fate, *Cold Creek Manor*—replete with economic undertones—was unofficially remade as *The Intruder* (2019). That film features *Cold Creek Manor*’s Dennis Quaid as the interloper who has lost his expensive home to a new, affluent metropolitan family. He even takes a job as a handyman on the premises. What this development reveals is that this “old story” still carries a relevance in a culture dealing with economic downturns, fifteen years after the story was told the first time.

Darkness Falls * *

Critical Reception

"...is so eager to please—and so incredibly cheesy—that I ended up almost admiring it. Put it in the so-bad-it's-good category, if you're in the mood for one of those things. That way you can marvel at dialogue such as this, which has to be one of my all-time favorite movie quotes: 'Sit down. I need to try to get this gravel out of your scalp.' Then there's the whole Tooth Fairy twist. Granted, the idea of someone who roots around under your pillow for teeth in the middle of the night is pretty creepy. That's something director Jonathan Liebesman acknowledges, in what has to be one of my all-time favorite quotes from a movie press kit: 'Instead of an angelic presence, this 'Tooth Fairy' is a murderous old hag who is terrorizing the whole town.' There you go."—Matt Soergel, *Florida Times Union*: "The attack of the killer Tooth fairy tale—Lose a tooth, run for your life," January 24, 2003, page WE-7.

"First-time feature film director Jonathan Liebesman gets better-than-expected performances out of his unknown cast, especially Kley and Cormie. And Liebesman employs a few splashy touches. The prologue is especially artful; the first attack makes good use of superficial blue lighting. And a pill-popping sequence succeeds with tricky camera work—although it was stolen from *Requiem for a Dream*. The film has a sense of humor as well, with characters commenting on situations facing them. Where *Darkness Falls* most hard is in the chills department. You can't blame the PG-13 rating after *The Ring* and *The Others* chilled to the bone with the same rating. Since the Tooth Fairy can come out only in complete darkness, the action is never clearly seen, obscured by the dark and by quick edits. We see the Tooth Fairy swooping down on victims, whooshing them up in the air and taking off with them. She looks like a twisted Muppet bird flying through the air on wires. And what's so scary about that?"—Kevin C. Johnson, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: "Does it Get Scary when *Darkness Falls*? Not So Much." January 24, 2003, page E3.

"Set in the conveniently named *Darkness Falls*, a small New England-ish costal town, a malevolent ghost seeks her revenge upon children of the town when they lose their last tooth after she was murdered by a mob over mistakenly missing children. Matilda or the Tooth Fairy visits the children of *Darkness Falls* the night they lose their last tooth and if the child or anyone else sees her, she murders them. Kyle (Chaney Kley) is one such unlucky child who manages to escape the Tooth Fairy as a child until he is called home by his childhood crush Caitlin (Emma Caulfield) who's younger brother Michael (Lee Cormie) is having the same fears as him.

This rather rote film has two distinguishing features, one is a truly scary opening scene when a young Kyle first encounters the Tooth Fairy and a rather nonsensical, patchwork plot that follows it. Thankfully the film clips along at a good pace and doesn't outstay its welcome as the end credits of the film run for over 11 minutes ensuring that the film was long enough to be release theatrically. The Tooth Fairy herself is an interesting, if unclear presence. Sometimes seeming like unhinged Christiane from *Eyes Without a Face* who has returned from beyond the grave to pester a town and other times like a truly terrifying creature, partially because the film can't decide whether it should withhold her from the film to create mystery or to have her fly randomly at the screen like a whack-a-mole game.

The film is an outlier not fitting in with many other films during this period though its closest relation is probably James Wan's *Dead Silence* (2007). *Darkness Falls* exists between a film trying to be austere and creepy while also pandering to a post-*Saw* leave-it-all-on-the-screen mentally. While far from a good film, *Darkness Falls* is certainly watchable and an interesting example of an old hag learning some new tricks."—Alexandra West, horror scholar and author of *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Chaney Kley (Kyle); Emma Caulfield (Caitlin); Lee Cormie (Michael); Grant Pirro (Larry); Sullivan Stapleton (Matt); Steve Mouzakis (Dr. Murphy); Peter Curtin (Dr. Travis); Kestie Morassi (Nurse Lauren); Jenny Lovell (Nurse Alex); John Stanton (Captain); Rebecca McCauley (Kyle's Mom).

CREW: Columbia Pictures and Revolution Studios Present *Darkness Falls*. Casting: Maura Fey. Production Designer: George Liddle. Director of Photography: Dan Laustsen. Music: Brian Tyler. Costume Designers: Anna Borghesi, Judy Bunn, Shane Phillips. Tooth Fairy Design: Stan Winston. Film Editors: Tim Alverson, Steve Mirkovich. Producers: John Fasano, John Hegeman, William Sherak, Jason Shuman. Executive Producers: Lou Arkoff, Derek Dauchy. Story by: John Harris. Written by: Joe Harris, John Fasano, James Vanderbilt. Directed by: Jonathan Liebesman. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young boy, Kyle (Kley), sees his mother (McCauley), killed by the evil Tooth Fairy, and grows up to be paranoid and afraid of the dark. Twelve years later, he encounters a childhood friend, Caitlin (Caulfield), whose brother, Michael (Cormie), can't sleep for more than ten minutes at a time, in a "night terror" case reminiscent of his own. The cure to their condition is not prescription meds, such as anti-psychotics, as doctors prescribe, but a return to the town of Darkness Falls, where, a 150 years ago, a woman Matilda Dixon, was wronged by the townspeople and hanged. Now, her disfigured spirit lurks in the darkness, killing any child in their bed, if they peek at the porcelain-masked Tooth Fairy.

COMMENTARY: *Darkness Falls* features a great, creepy villain, and a strong sound design. Beyond those accomplishments, however, it is a film that features a familiar plot, lacks a second act, and is, ultimately, a genre picture that can't stand up to scrutiny. The Tooth Fairy is a terrifying menace in the film, lurking in the darkness and taking in revenge what was "*once taken in kindness*" (teeth). Since the myth of the Toothy Fairy is as universal in modern American culture as is Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, it is a creative idea to turn this friendly figure into a terrifying monster of the cinema.

Furthermore, the Toothy Fairy comes at a point of transition in every young life, when a child loses the last of his or her baby teeth, meaning that they are "*not a baby anymore*." It is possible, to read from this entire scenario, a sub-text about adolescent sexuality. A mysterious visitor arrives by night, at the end of childhood, right? But the film never goes that deep into the human psyche, settling instead for a non-stop variety of chases and attacks instead, all filmed at such a velocity that the characters—and *Darkness Falls* itself—never stop to take a breath. The breakneck pace flattens out all terror and never stops to build suspense.

An oft-explored idea for horror films of the 2000s involves childhood trauma. To one extent or another, *They* (2002), *Darkness Falls* (2003), *Boogeyman* (2005) and *Dead Silence* (2006), all concern a childhood trauma, and most of these efforts also involve night terrors, utilizing as their thematic fulcrum a child's bedroom, and the night-time/bed-time ritual. In many cases, however, the films, like *Darkness Falls*, don't tread into psychological issues, but rather stay focused on surface or external fears like "*fear of the dark*." That's what *Darkness Falls* is really all about, and the key to defeating Matilda Dixon is simply, shining a light on her for an extended period of time. The climax is set, appropriately, in a light house, so that the darkness and its occupant can be swept away permanently. By contrast, the best horror films are the ones that go deep, that function as more than mere rollercoaster rides, shining a light (metaphorically in this case) on some facet of the human psyche or condition. *Darkness Falls* is satisfied to present only a very superficial terror, a game in which characters must jump and dodge and leap to stay in the light, and out of reach of the movie's monster. It's more like an elementary school playground game than an adult horror film.

Darkness Falls doesn't survive under scrutiny because the boundaries of Matilda Dixon's powers aren't really charted. How much light is enough to keep her at bay? How "dark" does it have to be for her to have free reign? Why can't the characters suffering "night terrors" simply sleep in the day, or under a night light, since they know the Tooth Fairy can't operate under illumination? The film also strains credibility when the Tooth Fairy attacks a police station, and makes itself widely known, instead of a rumored or whispered "myth." If a monster like this one attacked a police station in 2000s America, every news crew in the country (and likely the world) would descend on the town to learn more.

Obviously, the Tooth Fairy fears nothing and doesn't worry about being discovered. If that's the case, what are the range of her powers? Could she come to any town wherein a child loses a tooth? Again, the film is content to open doorways to all these thoughts, but then not walk through them in any meaningful fashion.

"*All this over a fucking tooth?*" Says one character in *Darkness Falls*, and indeed, that's a good point. *Darkness Falls* creates an elaborate mythology and crafts a number of fright sequences from the tooth fairy, but not enough attention is given to the psychological underpinnings of the characters, or the boundaries of this monster's abilities.

Dreamcatcher * 1/2

Critical Reception

"The movie veers without warning from claustrophobic drama to outlandish Special Effects: for example, an alien-slug stampede with helicopters blowing them to bits. So many subplots whiz by that none are especially memorable. Unless they're just plain unfortunate, as when Henry locates his mentally challenged mascot Duddits (Donnie Wahlberg), whose supernatural powers lead to the final showdown with Mr. Gray. Or is it Jonesy? Or do we care?"—Steve Persall, *St. Petersburg Times*, "Don't Catch this nightmare," Mary 20, 2003, page 6W.

"...the picture, which can be stereotypical and incoherent, is saved by Kasdan's talent (and the good ensemble cast). Faced with some of the lamest clichés in the scary-movie genre, he still brings you to the edge of your seat. Conjuring credibility and suspense from sorry banalities, he orchestrates the film as a series of cliffhangers, a brilliant way to give it some zap. Yet in retrospect, the film really doesn't make sense. For example, we're never quite sure who Morgan Freeman, sporting a military buzz cut and wounding underlings at will, is supposed to be. There's a split-personality element that smacks of a Jim Carrey routine. And the end is so abrupt that you have to wonder if Kasdan, perhaps protesting some studio interference, simply threw up his hands and turned off his camera. Still, a class act like Kasdan can—and does—make a difference. Our four psychics have a code: 'SSDD,' which stands for 'Same [expletive deleted], Different Day.' In *Dreamcatcher*'s case, it means 'Same [expletive deleted], Different Director.'"—Eleanor Ringel Gillespie, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, "A King-sized scare; Classy director redeems horror clichés." March 21, 2003, page 1.

"*Dreamcatcher* on both screen and page is all over the map, managing to be simultaneously jokey and scary, sentimental and ruthless, tediously every day and grotesquely out of the ordinary. There's only one reason you don't throw your hands up and move on, and that's because King has a gift for making us want to turn the page, to see what happens next."—Kenneth Turan, *The Los Angeles Times*: "Eek! Snooze.... Eek!; *Dreamcatcher* bounces between tedium and grotesque scariness." March 21, 2003, page E4.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Morgan Freeman (Col. Abraham Curtis); Thomas Jane (Henry); Jason Lee (Beaver); Damian Lewis (Jonesy); Timothy Olyphant (Pete); Tom Sizemore (Owen); Donnie Wahlberg (Duddits); Mikey Holekamp (Young Henry); Reece Thompson (Young Beaver); Giacomo Baessato (Young Jonesy); Joel Palmer (Young Pete); Andrew Robb (Young Duddits); Rosemary Dunsmore (Roberta); Michael O'Neill (General Mathewson); Darrin Kilmek (Maples); Campbell Lane (Gosselin); Ingrid Kavelaars (Trish); Chera Bailey (Rachel).

CREW: Warner Bros., Castle Rock Entertainment, Village Roadshow Pictures, and NPV Entertainment present a Kasdan Pictures production of a Lawrence Kasdan film, *Dreamcatcher*. Casting: Ronna Kress. Production Designer: John Hutman. Costume Designer: Molly Maginnis. Special Effects: Steve Johnson's Edge FX Inc., ILM, Crash McCreery. Music: James Newton Howard. Director of Photography: John Seale. Film Editors: Carole Littleton, Raul Davalos. Producers: Lawrence Kasdan, Charles Okun. Executive Producer: Bruce Berman. Based on the book by: Stephen King. Written by: William Goldman and Lawrence Kasdan. Directed by: Lawrence Kasdan. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 133 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Four lifetime friends—Henry (Jane), Beaver (Lee), Jonesy (Lewis) and Pete (Olyphant)—visit a cabin in the woods and unexpectedly encounter a malevolent alien being. The alien is infected Earth's life forms across the remote landscape of New England, in the forest. While the friends contend with the alien, and its possession of Jonesy, an obsessed Army general, Curtis (Freeman), attempts to quell the invasion, and its contagion, by all means possible. Meanwhile, a childhood friend of Henry, Beaver, Jonesy and Pete named Duddits (Wahlberg) may possess the secret to stopping the alien invasion of Earth.

COMMENTARY: Some of the characters in Lawrence Kasdan's overlong Stephen King adaptation,

Dreamcatcher, discuss the acronym S.S.D.D. That means, “Same Shit, Different Day.” The typical horror film aficionado may be forgiven if thinking, after watching this film, that S.S.D.D. describes it perfectly. Though the late 2010s saw Stephen King’s works such as *It* (2017) and *Doctor Sleep* (2019) rise to the forefront, once more, of public consciousness, that reckoning was still very far away indeed when this film was released in 2003. The problem with the film is its utter familiarity, in terms of King obsessions. *Dreamcatcher* concern a circle of friends who have grown up together and formed a tight friendship unit (*It*), a person with psychic ability (*The Shining*), and an alien invasion (*The Tommyknockers*). All these ideas have appeared in other King works and done so with more interest and clarity than is provided here.

At over two hours in length, *Dreamcatcher* often fails to show the audience anything it hasn’t seen before or seen done better elsewhere. And many character motivations don’t make sense. General Curtis, who is named after Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, is basically an unstable madman, and no reason is ever given for his behavior. Similarly, who is Mr. Grey, how did he come to choose Duddits as his vehicle to act, and why did he choose him? These are all answers that audiences might rightly expect the film to answer, but the film never gets around to it.

Similarly, *Dreamcatcher* is all over the place, at least tonally. When taken over by the aliens, human beings expel a lot of gas. In other words, they fart often. That is a silly conceit, but after introducing a gassy, infected man, the film then goes into an absolutely blood-soaked scene of the man passing the alien parasite in the bathroom. Beaver battles the monster as it attempts to get out of the toilet, and it is a (commendably) gory and harrowing scene. Yet the set-piece is jarring when placed next to all the fart jokes. Similarly, another scene finds Timothy Olyphant’s character (named Pete), bitten on the “peter” (the penis) while urinating, by the alien. Again, it’s just silly, and disgusting at the same time.

And all this leads finally, to an alien plot to contaminate the water supply of a nearby metropolis, so the alien contagion can spread. This is timely, since many citizens in the United States at the time were worried about terrorist plots to disrupt water systems during the ongoing War on Terror, but it nonetheless seems like an odd plotline and an example of human, rather than alien plan-making.

Basically, the movie is an endless parade of scenes that just don’t fit together. One moment, we’re stuck in a cabin with a monstrous alien parasite, another minute we’re at war with Curtis as he leads a helicopter strike on a massive alien ship, and it self-destructs. One minute, we’re asked to consider the sort of karmic debt that Dudditz owes his friends because they protected him in childhood, and the next, there’s that alien plot afoot to infect our water supply. The material just doesn’t hang together, or really seem to go together in any manageable way.

Dreamcatcher features some great actors, including Morgan Freeman, Thomas Jane, Damien Lewis, Jason Lee, and Timothy Olyphant and somehow manages to waste all of them in what feel like roles piped in from *It*. When the late Roger Ebert reviewed the film, he found that just about the only thing to like, if not the performances or plot, was the visualizing of Jonesy’s brain as a kind of vast library/warehouse, where he curated his memories. Indeed, that’s a resonant image. And it doesn’t last enough or feel creative enough to make the rest of this very long film bearable, let alone one that could be recommended.

At one point in the action, General Curtis warns a character that he will “*show you things you wish you’d never seen.*”

Dreamcatcher might just be number one on his list. It’s a (gassy), scattershot grab-bag of Stephen King’s favorite conceits.

Final Destination 2 * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“Part of the fun here is anticipating the Rube Goldberg–style machinations by which Death catches up with

its targets (the first, involving someone who has just won the lottery, is particularly convoluted, right down to the impaled blue eyes). There's also the bad signs and portents that abound—the prelude to the opening crash is loaded with them, hilariously so. It doesn't help that everyone knows what happened a year before, or that there are unexpected ties between the first group of victims and the second batch of survivors.”—Richard Harrington, *The Washington Post*: “This ‘Destination’ Still Worth the Trip,” January 31, 2003, page 41.

“The moviegoers most likely to enjoy this aggressively stupid sequel will be those lovers of over-the-top gore effects who cheer out loud when a character is sliced into three pieces that slowly slide apart.”—Michael Tunison, *Box Office Magazine*, February 2, 2003.

“Things get off to a bone-crunching start with a spectacular multi-car pile-up that sets Death’s plan in motion. Early on, director Ellis delivers some deliciously overwrought accidents but as the plot unravels—in particular a chase to find a pregnant woman whose unborn baby can upset Death’s appercat—the invention runs out of steam and into bluntness.”—William Thomas, *Empire Online*, February 7, 2003.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Michael Landes (Thomas Burke); David Paetkau (Evan Lewis); Lynda Boyd (Nora Carpenter); Keegan Connor Tracy (Kat Jennings); Jonathan Cherry (Rory Peters); T.C. Carson (Eugene Dix); Justina Machado (Isabella Hudson); Tony Todd (William Bludworth); Sarah Carter (Shaina); Andrew Airle (Michael Corman); Noel Fisher (Brian Gibbons); Aaron Douglas (Deputy).

CREW: New Line Cinema presents a Zide/Perry production, *Final Destination 2*. Casting: John Papsidera. Production Designer: Michael S. Bolton. Costume Designer: Jori Woodman. Director of Photography: Gary Capo. Film Editor: Eric A. Sears. Music: Shirley Walker. Special Effects: Pixel Magic, Digital Dimension Entertainment Group, WCT Productions. Producers: Craig Perry, Warren Zide. Executive Producers: Richard Brener, Toby Emmerich, Matt Moore, Jeffrey Riddick. Based on characters created by: Jeffrey Riddick. Story by: J. Mackye Gruber, Eric Bress, Jeffrey Riddick. Directed by: David R. Ellis. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the first anniversary of the Flight 180 disaster, a young woman, Kimberly (Cook), experiences a vision of a highway disaster, an accident of monumental proportions. She helps several others nearby avoid it too, including Thomas Burke (Landes). Soon, however, death starts to catch-up with those who would have died, had Kimberly’s vision not occurred. Realizing that death works according to a plan, and that it will come for each of the survivors in turn, Kimberly seeks out the guidance of Clear Rivers (Larter), the only survivor of the Flight 180 mystery. Alas, Clear has been hiding in a mental sanitarium since losing her friends.

COMMENTARY: After a brilliant first film, the *Final Destination* franchise hits the skids with a comparably poor second entry, one that slavishly repeats the formula of the 2000 hit, but with weaker performances, and a much-compromised sense of style. Mitigating these deficits somewhat, however, is the central disaster.

The harrowing accident is not a plane crash this time, but rather a highway disaster of unfathomable, “*shock and awe*” carnage. This set-piece is so stunning, so jaw-dropping that it actually grants the film a high degree of momentum, and pastes over some of the film’s major dramatic flaws. The surge of adrenaline generated by that catastrophe scene, as well as its sheer ingenuity in terms of special effects presentation and editing, lasts for a good while.

The central highway disaster must simply be seen to be believed. It involves, in no particular order, a logging truck, a motorcycle, a drunk driver, a cop, and a child playing with toys. More to the point, perhaps, the pile-up unfolds in a way that feels alarmingly real. If you’ve ever been in a car accident, or witnessed one close up, you know the feeling. There’s a sense of time slowing down, of inevitably, of

objects in motion trying to avert deadly trajectories in split seconds, unintended consequences of adjustments, and more.

In a very basic but powerful way horror films succeed on the basis of plumbing universal real-life fears or anxieties. For many, highway driving is a behavior that is stressful, if not downright terrifying. And, incidentally, driving is also one of the most dangerous activities a person can undertake in modern America. In 2003, the year that *Final Destination 2* was released, for example, more than 42 thousand people died in car accidents in the United States. There were over six million accidents that year all together, and they resulted in nearly three million injuries. These statistics, published by the National Center for Statistics and Analysis for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, prove just how universal car accidents are in the 21st century, and in terms of modern living.

The highway pile-up, which is the film's central set-piece, does not disappoint. On the contrary, it is a multiplication or progression of the kind of Rube Goldberg type deaths featured in the first film. In this instance, the sequel outdoes the originator by orders of magnitude. If the scarifying highway pile-up is the reason this film succeeds with viewers, one can understand that choice. It is harrowing, and as noted above, jaw dropping.

But beyond that? Beyond an extraordinarily rendered scene of terrifying, easy-to-identify with carnage? *Final Destination 2* has little to offer. The first film had strong, human performances from Larter, Sawa, Smith, Williams, and Cloke. This film is a full step-down in terms of the quality of performances, particularly in the verisimilitude of those performances. The quality of the acting here suggests a slapdash DTV follow-up, not a grade A follow-up to a new classic. Even Tony Todd, a genre legend, hams things up to an outrageous degree here.

In short, the quality of the performances makes *Final Destination 2* feel more like a bad movie, and less like a franchise built for the long haul. Glen Morgan and James Wong made *Final Destination* a self-reflexive, smart horror movie, too, by including call backs in character's names, for instance, to horror's stories past. They included in-jokes, like the inclusion of John Denver's Rocky Mountain High, and tied it to a plane crash (which was also the cause of Denver's death, as noted in the review for that film). They brought an intellect, or style, to the way the story was vetted, so that it was more than just a straightforward horror film; it was a horror film about fate, but also a horror film about the genre.

Final Destination 2 lacks that second level of interest and meaning. It's not a kind observation, but *Final Destination 2* is not merely a more straightforward, simpler version of the same material. It's a dumbed-down version.

Final Destination 2 also fails in large part because it adds little to the formula established by the first film. It just repeats that formula, mostly without variation. Here, there is the recognition that new life (like the birth of a baby) can "defeat Death," and also the idea that dying, and being revived (for instance, after drowning), serves Death's plan on a technicality. But these innovations only nibble around the edges of the film's narrative. Everything else is bland recitation of what we've already seen.

We get the vision of doom and escape from doom; the real disaster; the survivors hunted down; the survivors who learn the truth and try to avoid Death's plan. And then we get Death's inevitable stalking of the survivors. The *Final Destination* series is a solid franchise, and a timely one in the 2000s because it certainly captures the idea of there being no escape from fate. The statement a character makes here "*we're all going to die, aren't we?*" is actually a statement of fact regarding all human life, and a fact that we deny on a daily basis. I'm going to die. My wife will die. One day, hopefully long in the future, my son will die. To quote another line from the film: "*you can't cheat. There are no escapes.*" The virtue of these films is that they bring this idea into the light; the idea that we deny regularly, that random fate (or here, the Hand of Death) can take us at any time. It can happen in a plane crash, or in a highway pile-up, on a roller-coaster, or from exposure to a COVID-19. *Final Destination 2* probably gets as much love as it does because even though it is formulaic and repetitive, and poorly performed, it shares with the other (better) films in the franchise this blunt-faced and scary acknowledgment of the nature of human life. Death has a design for us all, and the trick is to delay Death, trick Death, and avoid Death as long as we possibly can. Even at its weakest, *Final Destination 2* still explores the terrifying idea of how unpredictable our lives are, except in the fact of their ending.

In some ways, the *Final Destination* films are the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films or *Friday the 13th* films of the 2000s. The franchise starts with a blaze of genius and ingenuity that carries the series through weaker entries (like this one). But the appeal of the series is powerful, and weak entries still succeed enough to pave the way for sometimes better sequels. That's certainly the case here. *Final Destination 3* is a step up from *Final Destination 2*.

Freddy vs. Jason ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"*Freddy vs. Jason* isn't a great horror film by any stretch, yet sheer momentum and the celebration of cliché (half-naked girls screaming their heads off) make it watchable."—Mike Pearson, *Oakland Tribune*, "*Freddy vs. Jason* watchable, leaves room for another sequel." January 17, 2004, page 1.

"After the smart, energetic direction of *Bride of Chucky*, Ronny Yu's helming is a huge disappointment—on top of everything else, *Freddy vs. Jason* is a mostly joyless affair; for all of its subversive, slasher picture/cult film trappings, it's a thoroughly antiseptic and precise piece of filmmaking, right down to lots of over-crafted CGI gore effects (where are the practicals when you need them? Were Savini and KNB too smart to get involved in this debacle?!). For a movie that *should* be wild and bloody, politically incorrect and anti-establishment (in the best sense), *Freddy vs. Jason* feels like a picture that has been focus-grouped and test-audience'd to, ahem, death."—Scott B., *IGN*: "The Audience Loses," August 14, 2003.

"As a child, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* seems like the perfect film—it's like a plate served to you with all of your favorite foods at once. Then, you get older, your palate grows more sophisticated, and you can say it's probably the best horror-comedy out there, but it's not the best Universal monster film. It's still good, and we'll always love it.

Which brings me to *Freddy vs. Jason*. It's kind of the same boat. It's never going to eclipse the best films of either franchise. It's better than some of the worst films of the two franchises. And after so many years of teasing this film, we should be grateful we got anything at all. There are books and YouTube videos about the versions of this script that didn't get made—it's almost like a subgenre unto itself. Robert England's final (in film, anyway, and I'd be very happy if he made this statement inaccurate in the near future) appearance as our favorite razor-glove-wearing-dream-predator is everything you could ever want, down to the final wink. We didn't get Kane Hodder back for Jason (apparently due to ... height?), which was a bit of a bummer. But this film delivered the fun, if not the scares, and came up with a plotline that made it work.

By the time our titular anti-heroes are finally at each other's throats, we're ready for what we were promised by a certain 'versus' movie in the past (Wolf Men and Frankenstein Monsters, he's probably talking about you), and they actually had a lengthy battle, with a debatable conclusion (if you're playing *King Kong vs. Godzilla* bingo, that probably checks a box for you). This movie actually happened, and it wasn't terrible, so three cheers for us, and we're probably fortunate that Pinhead, Ash, Michael Myers, Leatherface, and anybody else suggested for sequels had the magic talisman to prevent erosion of our good will in the form of ... you guessed it ... rights issues. That's where they were headed folks—I think we all dodged a bullet, or a spear, or a glove with sharp edges..."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Robert Englund (Freddy Krueger), Ken Kirzinger (Jason Voorhees); Monica Keena (Lori Campbell); Jason Ritter (Will Rollins); Kelly Rowland (Kia Waterson); Christopher George Marquette (Chris Marquette); Brendan Fletcher (Mark Davis); Katharine Isabelle (Gibb); Lochlyn Munro (Deputy Scott Stubbs); Kyle Labine (Bill Freeburg); Tom Butler (Dr. Campbell); David Kopp (Blake); Paula Shaw (Ms. Voorhees); Jesse Hutch (Trey); Zack Ward (Bobby Davis); Garry Chalk (Sheriff Williams); Brent Chapman (Blake's Father); Spencer Stump (Young Jason Voorhees).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Crystal Lake Entertainment, and Sean S. Cunningham Films presents *Freddy vs. Jason*. Casting: Matthew Barry, Nancy Green-Keyes. Production Designer: John Willett. Costume Designer: Gregory B. Mah. Special Effects: Cinesite Pixel Magic, Digital Dimension, Asylum, Digiscope, Yannix Technology Corp. Music: Graeme Revell. Director of Photography: Fred Murphy. Film Editor: Mark Stevens. Producer: Sean S. Cunningham. Executive Producers: Stokely Chaffin, Sean S. Cunningham, Douglas Curtis, Robert Shaye, Renee Witt. Based on characters created by: Wes Craven and Victor Miller. Written by: Damian

SYNOPSIS: In the depths of Hell, mass murderer Freddy Krueger (England) laments his inability to impact the children of the real world anymore. The people of Springwood have forgotten his reign of terror, so he needs someone to revive his fearsome legend. He discovers that individual in mad-dog-killer Jason Voorhees (Kirzinger), the Crystal Lake slasher. Imitating Jason's Mother, Freddy convinces Jason to travel from his corner of Hell to Springwood and begin a killing spree; one designed to revive the memory of Freddy. On Elm Street in Springwood, teenage Lori (Keena) and her friend Kia (Rowland) soon realize that the town is being stalked by not one boogeyman, but two. Lori's old boyfriend Will (Ritter) joins them, after escaping Westin Hills Sanitarium, to help bury Freddy and Jason permanently.

COMMENTARY: Globally speaking, the overriding creative impulse behind cinematic monster meetups seems to be the pent-up fan-desire or built-in coolness factor associated with such clashes. These films answer, first and foremost, the question, wouldn't it be cool to see (fill in the blank) fight (fill in the blank)? Bluntly written, that isn't the most artistic or dramatic motive underlining a work of art, or even a popular entertainment. And because "versus" movies tend to feature two separate continuities, the screenplay writers involved also have to pack in a lot of supporting material and make certain that each monster or participant is given a moment of glory. However, these contests do tend, at the very least, to reveal a new shade of the characters. In both versus films, one "villain" unexpectedly becomes the hero or champion, while the other is dismissed as irredeemable or evil. Whoever wins, we lose, in other words. But by the same token, sometimes it takes evil to fight evil. For example, in *AVP*, the Predator, Scar, joins up with Alexa (Sanaa Lathan), working with a human to defeat the *real* bad guys: aliens. And Jason adopts a similar role in *Freddy vs. Jason*, proving to be the slasher/monster that humans can—if not work with—then at least manipulate towards their own end. Indeed, *Freddy vs. Jason* is the first film in the *Friday the 13th* continuity to attempt to steer the audience's empathy towards the hockey-masked slasher and not away from him. Here, we get a dream sequence revealing Jason to be a bullied, neglected, ostracized child. Freddy, by contrast (and like the aliens) is sinister and unrepentant. He's the "real" monster, the true evil that must be defeated.



He's your boyfriend now. Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund) snuggles up to Lori (Monica Keena) in *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003).

Alas, other than that new perspective on the guy in the hockey mask, *Freddy vs. Jason* doesn't have much going for it. The human characters are paper-thin, even though it is always nice to see the remarkable Katharine Isabelle (*Ginger Snaps*) in another horror role. Also, Jason Mewes should probably sue the makers of the film for appropriating without permission his silver screen persona from the View Askewniverse in a few key scenes. Beyond the fact that the human characters are either dull or derivative, *Freddy vs. Jason* genuinely lacks scares too. The final battle at Crystal Lake is shot well, and it's really bloody, but it isn't scary. An unexpected side-effect of these monster-on-monster smack-downs, then, seems to be that terror dissipates, and two franchises are actually compromised rather than improved.

When a studio green-lights a project like *Freddy vs. Jason*, it no doubt expects to revitalize two franchises for the price of one. Funny how that is almost never the real-world result. Even the attempt to be faithful to *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th* lore is only partially successful in *Freddy vs. Jason*. There's quite a bit of rewriting or ret-conning going on here to get the two monsters into the same world, either dreams or reality, and the ret-cons don't always fit with the established canon.



Jason Voorhees (Ken Kirzinger) is back in *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), and he's headed for Elm Street.

Most disturbingly, *Freddy vs. Jason* doesn't seem to have much of a sense of fun about this clash of the titans. A lot of the *Elm Street* sequels got by on a wing and a prayer, action set-pieces and a wicked sense of humor. But *Freddy vs. Jason* doesn't express any sort of joy in Freddy's return. We get lame one-liners and all, but there's a sense that the filmmakers don't really love or fully understand the appeal of the material.

Freddy vs. Jason ends, finally, with no real winners.

Freddy vs. Jason opens and closes strong, however, one must give it that much. The film commences with the words of the most unreliable of all narrators, Freddy Krueger, and in broad but effective strokes, re-tells the origin stories of Freddy and Jason. The film squeezes much information into this colorful montage, and it works surprisingly well. It's an intriguing device to have Freddy speaking to the audience directly, telling the viewer his warped side of his own story, and it opens the film on a high note. It feels like a fresh take.

But after that ingenious opener, the film introduces the lead (teen) characters, and they are all as milquetoast as humanly possible. Lori is our standard feisty final girl™ and Will is the “outsider” but always loyal boyfriend. There's also your obligatory co-culture “best friend,” in this case African American young woman, Kia. These characters are so dull and so uninteresting, in part, because they don't honor the tradition of either supporting franchise. Actresses such as Heather Langenkamp, Amy Steel, Patricia Arquette, and Lisa Wilcox all demonstrated how a solid, thoughtful performer could take a lead character in a slasher film and imbue that character with life, energy and individuality. That lesson has been forgotten here. Lori's most memorable trait is, alas, her swollen lips, which appear to be the result of bad plastic surgery. The filmmakers seem bound and determined to feature elements or call-backs to previous franchise entries including 1428 Elm Street, Westin Hills Sanitarium, Hypnocil, the Freddy Worm, Jason's mother, and Camp Blood, but they might have been wiser to focus on creating human characters that the audience can care about or can invest its energy in. Certainly, the *Elm Street* sequels are of variable quality, but they are enlivened by pro-social portrayals of insightful and courageous young women. Alice, the Dream Master, fights Freddy, it's true, but also goes through the process of self-actualization. Nancy Thompson, similarly, gets cast as horror's Prince of Denmark (or Princess), Hamlet, tasked with going through the lies of her morally questionable parents. These characters had weight and individuality and made the films more than mere “dead teenager” movies. One would be hard-pressed to find teens less interesting than those featured in *Freddy vs. Jason*.

For example, that horrid Jason Mewes knock-off. That's what he is, and there's no way to deny it. He's a lookalike/sound-alike doing the Mewes' shtick. Since that's all he is, why didn't the filmmakers actually just hire Jason Mewes himself? Because audiences know that persona from the New Jersey Cycle (seven films and counting), they would at least register him as an authentic human being and not a cipher. Instead, one can't see *Freddy vs. Jason*'s stoner as a human being or person, just as a rip-off, a derivative clone, thus taking the viewer out of the movie's narrative every time he appears on screen. And, let's face it, love or hate the Mewes persona, the actor would have added a clear sense of fun to the proceedings. Imagine watching Mewes go up against Jason. It's impossible not to smile at the thought.

In another creative area all together, the movie's screenplay hems and haws. The movie wants to studiously avoid giving the audience a clear winner in the fight. Freddy gets his moment in the sun, turning Jason into a human pinball in the dream world. Then Jason gets his glorious moment, decapitating Freddy and emerging from the water in (a beautifully shot, beautifully visualized) epilogue. But Freddy winks at the camera, just so no one draws too strong a conclusion about the victor. Did Freddy and Jason have it in their contracts that neither one could win? What's the fun of setting up a fight like this if no one can be crowned the winner?

Again, what is most intriguing about *Freddy vs. Jason*—and it may not have even been intentional—is that when these characters are thrown together, viewers, make judgment calls about the true villainy of our two starring monsters. Jason seems compelled to maim and murder, but it feels instinctual, like it is part of his wiring. He's a humanoid great white shark. Freddy, by contrast, relishes in his badness. He intellectualizes it, seeks out ways to increase his range, and manipulates others. So, Jason is the shark in *Jaws*, and Freddy is Hannibal Lecter. If one accepts that comparison, Freddy is the

eviler of these two monsters, and one almost can't blame Jason for what he does. The sympathetic flashbacks make it clear that his vengeance is righteous, or at least justified. So, if you get in Jason's way, yes, he will kill you (as Kia learns). But Freddy will seek you out, and find ways to get you, regardless of where you are, what you are doing, or why you are there. He's a puppet master and a schemer. Again, this comparison would not exist if we didn't have the monsters sharing the same story.

Still, some of the ret-conning doesn't work. Apparently, the filmmakers desire for each monster to have "Kryptonite," the thing/element that stops him in his tracks. Freddy's kryptonite is fire, and that is sensible. He died in fire. But now, suddenly, Jason is afraid of water? He drowned in Crystal Lake in 1980, but many previous films have revealed him emerging from the lake or attacking skinny dippers in the water (*Part VII* is one example of the latter instance). But now he can't even approach water without paralyzing terror? That just doesn't pass the smell test.

The fights between Freddy vs. Jason are well-orchestrated, and in that way, everyone gets their money's worth. At least in this case, gore is not shorted. The wide-ranging final fight, which moves from cabin in the woods to construction site to lakeside, lives up to expectations in terms of violence and bloody depiction of said violence. The problem is—again like *AVP*—that the whole movie is constructed around a fifteen-minute fight. The rest of the movie is merely filler, and often dumb filler at that. There should be a TV series called "Versus" where all great movie monsters can fight one another with glorious special effects and extreme destruction, sparing us the necessity of seeing whole movies built for a single serving purpose.

Bottom line: *Freddy vs. Jason* isn't fun enough or scary enough to honor its parent franchises. But it is bloody enough. Some days, that will do, one supposes.

Perhaps it's time to put these bad dogs to sleep for good?

Gothika * * *

Critical Reception

"The acting in the movie is good, although some of the dialogue is pointless. For the most part, the plot is rather predictable, aside from a couple of unexpected twists. The main problem with the film is that it tries too hard to be *The Sixth Sense*. Where the movie really succeeds is in its ability to startle and build suspense. The filmmakers shot the film in an eerie setting. They do a good job at not letting the audience relax. The music also adds to the drama. While it's never going to be considered a classic horror movie, *Gothika* most likely is worth your time if you like to jump."—Jeni Ross, *Spokesman Review*, "Gothika will have you jumping in your seat." December 8, 2003, page B7.

"If you miss only one movie this holiday season, please make it *Gothika*. Halle Berry is a respected psychiatrist accused of chopping her husband into tiny pieces in a ghastly ghost thriller by French director Mathieu Kassovitz that could have played for a few nervous laughs last summer but is woefully out of place in the current race for Oscar consideration or fuzzy Yuletide feelings."—John Griffin, *CanWest News*, November 2003, page 1.

"Berry works hard at making this contrivance work, but it's a thankless task. The script from Sebastian Gutierrez ... burdens her with too many memory lapses, too much illogical discussion and way too many trips down dark hallways (with the electricity always breaking down when ghosts are about). And director Matthieu Kassovitz ... seems determined to make Berry, and Penelope Cruz, as a patient of Grey's, look just awful. But what's really irritating about *Gothika* are its cheap shots. For example, the frightening moments all come from the 'cat jumping out of the closet' school of scare tactics and have little to do with the outcome of the plot."—George Meyer, *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, "Gothika disappointing from beginning to end," November 21, 2003, page 19.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Halle Berry (Miranda Grey); Robert Downey, Jr. (Pete Graham); Charles S. Dutton (Dr. Douglas Grey); John Carroll Lynch (Sheriff Ryan); Barnard Hill (Phil Parsons); Penelope Cruz (Chloe Sava); Dorian

Harewood (Teddy Howard); Brownwen Mantel (Irene); Kathleen Mackey (Rachel Parsons); Matthew G. Taylor (Turlington); Michel Perron (Joe); Andrea Sheldon (Tracey Seavers); Anana Rydvald (Nurse).

CREW: Columbia Pictures, Warner Bros and Dark Castle Entertainment present *Gothika*. Casting: Marci Liroff. Production Design: Graham Walker. Costume Design: Kym Barrett. Special Effects: DFW, CafeFX ComputerCafe, 3DSite. Music: John Ottman. Director of Photography: Matthew Libatique. Written by: Sebastian Gutierrez. Director: Matthew Kassovitz. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A psychiatrist at Woodward Penitentiary, Miranda Grey (Berry), wakes up one morning incarcerated and learns that she murdered her husband. She has no recollection of the event, however, and starts to see the spirit of a dead girl. One of Miranda's former colleagues, Pete Graham (Downey Jr.), treats her, but Miranda must adjust to a new life when she is not believed, and worse, considered crazy. She realizes she must escape incarceration, and that solving the mystery of the ghost girl will also help her recover her memories.

COMMENTARY: In broad terms, to “gaslight” someone means to manipulate someone into doubting their own sanity, usually so as to deflect personal guilt. When all is said and done, *Gothika* is a movie about a woman who is gaslighted by her husband. She loses her memories, is incarcerated in a mental institution, and must communicate with a spirit to learn the truth, and to understand what it feels like not to be heard. Although the #MeToo movement was fourteen years or so away when *Gothika* was made, the movie—like quite a few of the horror films of the 2000s—is about men behaving badly. And that “behaving badly” descriptor incorporates a lot. It incorporates not just men exploiting women but hiding the fact that they are doing so from other women by, well, gaslighting, them. *Gothika*, like *What Lies Beneath*, *Shutter*, and other horror films of this decade, explores the dynamics of the #MeToo movement before it had a name (but when men were, nonetheless, behaving poorly).

The protagonist in *Gothika*, Dr. Miranda Jones, is treated as insane by her colleagues and superiors, and, like many female victims of abuse, is gaslighted so she does not recognize it. Worse, her reputation is destroyed so that her accusations are not heard or believed. It's rather amazing to consider it, but this film gets at the heart of a major American social movement before the social movement had been codified or organized. As a horror film, *Gothika*, like *What Lies Beneath*, uses supernatural elements—or key elements to make its points.

In *Gothika*, Miranda is the wife of a prominent doctor, and a psychiatrist herself. She is respected, and attempts to project empathy with her clients, who are incarcerated at a mental institute. Her legitimacy, and her effectiveness as a therapist are suspect, however, because she doesn't believe the stories of those she treats. She hears, but she doesn't really listen. One of her clients, Chloe, tells her “*You have no idea how it feels not to be trusted. You can't trust someone who thinks you are crazy.*” In the course of the film, she is put in the same position, so she can understand what it is like not to be believed. In the process, she has to lose her status. Chloe tells her, once she is incarcerated with her former clients, “*You're invisible now.*”

This is all a perfect metaphor for gaslighting, and the fate that often awaits women who make accusations against powerful men. To speak up against a powerful man who has wronged them, they sacrifice, in a very real way, their good names. Their sanity, their honesty, their motives are all questioned. And because they are disbelieved and feel powerless, they no doubt feel invisible too. In *Gothika*, Miranda has to put herself in the place of a woman who knows the truth, to see that truth.

In this case, that truth is that her husband, the respected Dr. Grey, is, essentially, Bill Cosby, or Donald Trump, or Harvey Weinstein.

Specifically, in this case, Dr. Grey has a secret dungeon where he rapes young women, and videotapes all the proceedings. He hid this from her, and society gaslighted her. She is made to feel wrong, invisible, and mad for what she sees (a ghost sentry who can lead her to the truth). When Miranda comes out the other side of her dark experience, she tells Chloe that she taught her to “*listen.*”

Gothika's visual canvas is fascinating too. When Miranda is separated from the truth, the film is dark, silvery and blue, and suffused with rain. When she finds the farm, despite the dark nature of the discovery, the film becomes golden, rich with the light of knowledge. The film works well on a visual level, with its herky-jerky ghosts, many shots of vent grates and chain link fences to suggest entrapment and, in the words of the screenplay "*a woman in purgatory*" It also work well on a thematic level, if one understands it is a film, once the bells and whistles are removed, that is about women learning to overcome the lies that the gas-lighters in their lives have told them.

What perhaps doesn't work so well in *Gothika* is its final act, which devolves, to some extent into serial killer clichés with the discovery of a second culprit, and unnecessary action. Robert Downey plays a mostly unnecessary and irritating role, too. But the film's finale is satisfying, particularly the notion that we must have empathy for those who are abused and exploited. They deserve the benefit of the doubt, which our culture rarely gives, because they have no real voice or power in the system. Miranda learns to empathize with Chloe only when she learns what it is like to be Chloe, incarcerated, dismissed, abused. Her feelings of powerlessness, of noting being heard, are clearly contrasted with her husband's feelings, as he does the abusing. "*It's good to be God*," he declares. Again, the parallels to what our society has now seen, years later, with men in power abusing women, like Cosby, Trump, Kavanaugh and Weinstein, make *Gothika* sing out like the canary in the coal mine.

House of 1000 Corpses * * *

Critical Reception

"Rob Zombie has some talent with the camera, making great use of colour and lighting throughout, which helped create some atmosphere. He's obviously a great fan of horror as well, as this film seemed more like a tribute to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* more than anything else. The actual scenes of gore were certainly vivid, but they lacked the dramatic tension of John Carpenter's *Halloween*, or even the *Blair Witch Project* to be considered scary. After a while, I must admit that the gore got actually got boring. Zombie made it pretty obvious that he was rooting for the villains the entire time, which was obviously why so little time was spent developing the victims 'characters.'"—Matt Gilbert, *Peterborough Examiner*: "*House of 1,000 Corpses* not for weak at heart," June 25, 2003, page D6.

"*House of 1,000 Corpses* is the kind of movie whose creators will take its worst reviews and celebrate them in the ad campaign. Buzzwords such as 'gruesome,' 'repellent,' and 'an assault on humanity' may become badges of honor to lure those for whom gruesome, repellent assaults on humanity define quality cinema. It's likely the advertising folks will have plenty of adjectives to play with, since *1,000 Corpses* is everything it set out to be—a bloody mess, in every conceivable connotation. The movie was written and directed by shock-rocker Rob Zombie apparently as an homage to, or rip-off of, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, with a fraction of the suspense and triple the gore (though like *TCM* it is set in the '70s)."—Jim Keogh, *Telegram & Gazette*, "Formulaic brutality not fit to be seen," April 14, 2003, page C4.

"Zombie, who resembles and behaves as if he were Alice Cooper on steroids, seems to have devised *House of 1,000 Corpses* as a paean to every sadistic gore film produced since the R rating was implemented in 1968. The result, initially startling and impressive, soon becomes merely numbing. The premise—two young couples researching serial killers run afoul of a passel of them—launches one kaleidoscopic set-piece after another, all involving mutilation, cannibalism and other societal taboos. I kept hoping Zombie, who is not untalented, would take it all somewhere interesting, but he never does."—Bill Kelley, *Sarasota Herald Tribune*: "'1000 Corpses' ladles on the humor and the gore," April 18, 2003, page 19.

Cast & Crew

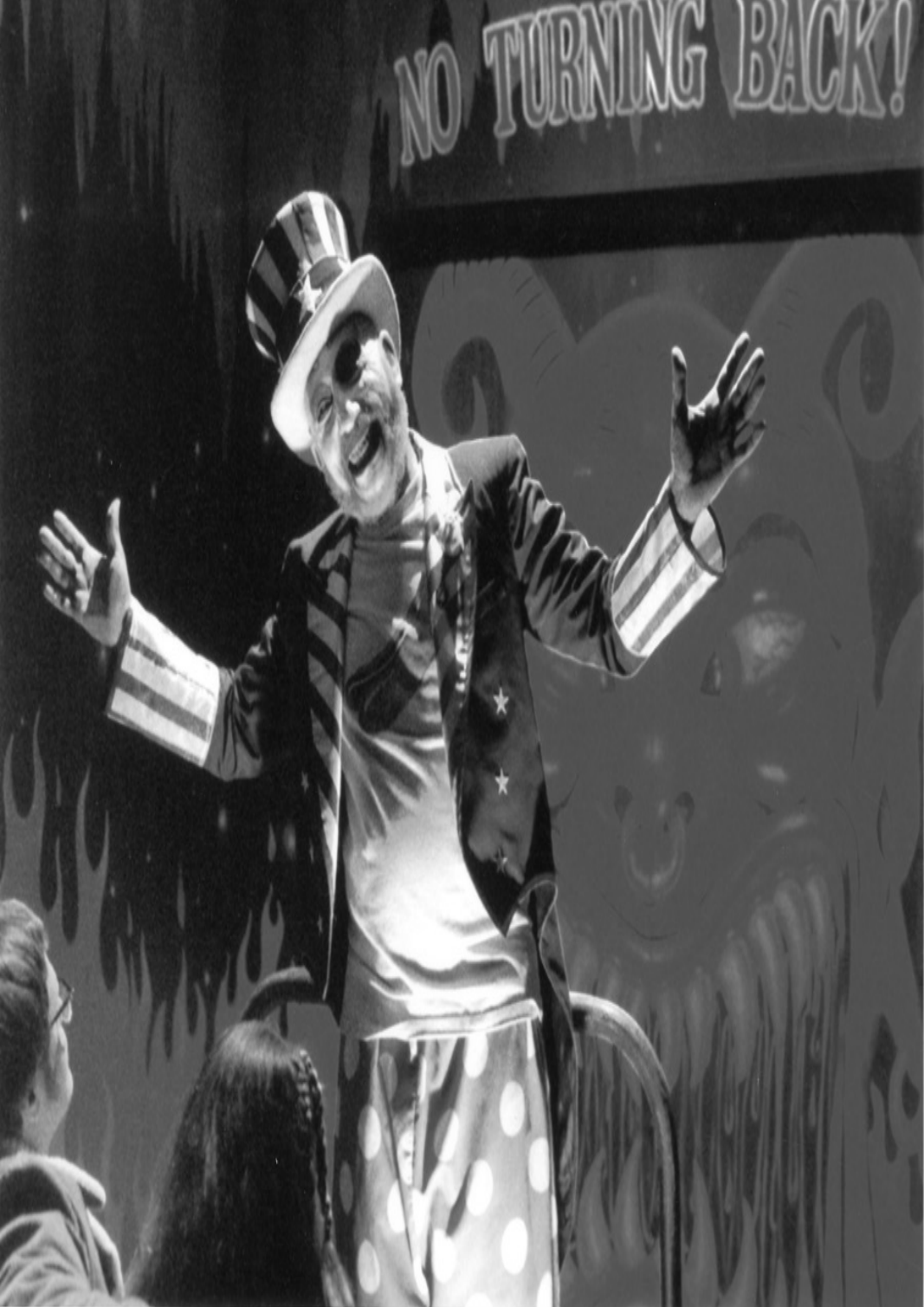
CAST: Sid Haig (Captain Spaulding); Bill Moseley (Otis); Sheri Moon Zombie (Baby); Karen Black (Mother Firefly); Chris Hardwick (Jerry); Erin Daniels (Denise); Jennifer Joslyn (Mary Knowles); Rainn Wilson (Bill); Walton Goggins (Steve Naish); Tom Towles (Deputy); Matthew McGrory (Tiny); Robert Allen Mukes (Rufus);

Michael J. Ballard (Stucky); Dennis Fimple (Grandpa Hugo); Harrison Young (Don Willis); William Bassett (Sheriff Frank Huston).

CREW: Lions Gate Films, Universal Pictures, and Spectacle Entertainment Group present a Rob Zombie film, *House of 1000 Corpses*. Casting: Dean E. Fronk, Donald Paul Pemrick. Costume Designer: Amanda Friedland. Production Designer: Gregg Gibbs. Special Effects: Howard Anderson Company, Art FX. Music: Scott Humphrey, Rob Zombie. Directors of Photography: Alex Poppas, Tom Richmond. Film Editors: Kathryn Himoff, Robert K. Lambert, Sean Lambert. Producer: Andy Gould. Executive Producers: Andy Given, Guy Oseary. Written and Directed by: Rob Zombie. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two young couples on a road trip exploring roadside attractions and hoping to learn more about the local legend of Dr. Satan make a stop at Captain Spaulding's (Haig) "*Museum of Monsters and Mad Men*." Afterwards, they pick up a hitchhiker, Baby (Moon Zombie), who ensnares them in the affairs of the Firefly clan, a demented local family of murderers. Otis (Moseley), Spaulding, Tiny (McGrory) and Mama Firefly (Black), along with Baby, torture the youngsters, and decide to introduce them to Dr. Satan, a fearsome figure renowned for his primitive brain surgery.

COMMENTARY: Rob Zombie's directorial debut showcases well the director's love of 1970s horror films, if not necessarily his chops as a filmmaker. *House of 1000 Corpses* is a violent and horrific road trip gone wrong film in the style of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Zombie's film focuses on a family of similar dimensions with both the Sawyers of *Chainsaw* and the Firefly clan of *House* populated by a hitchhiker, and a physically monstrous individual (Leatherface/Tiny) who can't pass, exactly, for human. Both families also operate road-side businesses, a barbecue stand/gas station, and the Museum of Monsters and Mad Men, respectively. This business, in the tradition of all good road trip gone wrong movies, represents in both cases the borderland between civilization and madness, or savagery. There's even a grandpa in both films.



It's show-time! Captain Spaulding (Sid Haig) is just your average, all-American psycho in Rob Zombie's *House of 1,000 Corpses* (2003).

House of 1000 Corpses observes well all the conventions and ideas of a 1970s horror film in the mode of a Tobe Hooper or Wes Craven effort like *The Hills Have Eyes*, but at times suffers from two aspects: a lack of depth involving the film's thematic underpinnings, and an overreliance in the editing on flash cuts, no doubt to hide the seams in scene transitions.

Although the sequel to this film, *The Devil's Rejects* (2005) would focus on the Firefly family exclusively, *House of a 1000 Corpses* gazes at the clan in relation to Dr. Satan, a mad and fearsome figure living underground (literally) who performs terrifying surgery on his unwilling patients. The last act of the film is terrifying indeed as it descends into the lair of this inhuman surgeon, who possesses no sympathy, and no acknowledgment of his patients' pain, suffering or even humanity. Although this sequence is indeed terrifying, the connection between the Fireflies and Dr. Satan is tenuous at best. Why do they serve this particular madman? More importantly, what does it all mean? What is the thematic purpose of the story?

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre is a film beloved by horror fans and film scholars because it is seen as functioning on multiple levels simultaneously. It is a terrifying horror movie about a road trip gone wrong. It is also about regional differences in America. Hooper's masterpiece is also, in many ways, a film about vegetarianism, and, even, perhaps, about an America run out of gas economically and morally in Nixon's seventies.

The bottom line is that *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* can be interpreted in multiple ways that suggest the makers were aware of the story's value outside of the genre; outside of an effort simply to scare people. By contrast, *House of a 1000 Corpses* barely even makes literal connections between the film's monsters, the colorful Firefly's and Dr. Satan, let alone a larger thematic statement about America in the 1970s, or any other context. The characters are gross and monstrous, and the horror sequences are well-done, in part because what Dr. Satan threatens to do to people is worse than killing them. His not-at-all tender ministrations keep people alive, but as shells of their former selves; as drooling, pitiable creatures. This loss of identity is in many ways more frightening than simply being murdered. And the great thing about Rob Zombie is that he is the first director in the genre, perhaps, since Hooper that audiences fear; or feel will show them things they might not necessarily want to see. The Hooper mystique is all about being the so-called "corkscrew" kid, and making audiences feel endangered by his unpredictability. Zombie possesses a similar flavor. He boasts a tactlessness about him that suggests he will go places audiences may be frightened to follow, and that sense of unpredictability and legitimate danger works in this film's favor, even though it is not smart, or meaningful, in the same way as the seventies horror films he pays homage to are.

In terms of theme, it seems that the aspect that most appeals to Zombie here and is most enunciated involves the family dynamics. The Firefly family is a monster family, but a family nonetheless, which is an idea that keeps coming up in the film courtesy of imagery seen on the television set at the Firefly house, of efforts such as *House of Frankenstein* (1944), a film which assembled a group of monsters (Wolfman, hunchback, Dracula, etc.) under one roof, basically, and also *Munster, Go Home!* (1966), another film featuring a family of monsters. The inference is that the Firefly clan, with its diverse monsters—Spaulding (a ghoulish clown), Otis (a straight-up homicidal maniac), Tiny (a Leatherface-type), Baby (the honey trap), and Mama (a Tennessee Williams woman gone nuts)—is a similar monster family.

In many ways, the Firefly family functions as the film's protagonists and as the film's most compelling characters. They are the ones who are best developed. They are seen to possess alternate/controversial ideas about society and morality ("*there is no wrong*," says Baby at one point), and despite all their in-fighting, also seem to support one another above all else. For them, family comes first, no matter what. That is interesting, but not a particularly deep or socially relevant observation about either the time period of the film (1970s), or the context in which it was made (the 2000s). It's fair to state then that Zombie's film observes all the surface values of the 1970s road trip gone wrong genre, but not the deeper meaning of such fare.

This is not a war between two classes, "two Americas," like *The Hills Have Eyes*. Nor is it a warning not to tread into the South, in a time of economic calamity, like *Chainsaw*. This observation doesn't

make the film any less scary, or any less entertaining, but it does make the difference between a good horror movie, and a great one; one that is timeless and able to be appreciated by multiple generations.

Also, it is fair to note that *House of 1000 Corpses* doesn't represent Zombie at his most accomplished and daring at a filmmaker. That was still to come (see the daring, go-for-broke, though controversial *Halloween II* [2009]). There are a lot of interstitial flash cuts and black outs in the film that look like editorial efforts to get the movie over rough spots; transitions that didn't get shot, or moments that didn't align, continuity-wise. These moments are an editorial attempt to build style, not an organic expression of Zombie's style. Another quality that differentiates a masterpiece like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* from a run-of-the-mill road-trip-gone-wrong movie is its cinematography. That film is unflaggingly beautiful, and there are no interruptions in the editing that break the immersion in the director's world. The same cannot be said for *House of 1000 Corpses*.

Zombie remains a controversial figure in horror circles. For some, it is because of his audacity (or arrogance) to remake a classic like *Halloween* (2007) all according to his own muse. For others, the brutal, foul-mouthed, white-trash elements of his world are simply too bracing, too trashy to contend with. Love him or hate him, this director possesses a vision, and *House of 1000 Corpses* showcases the formative steps in his ability to bring that vision to life through artistic montage and mise-en-scene. The film is no failure. In fact, it is a well-made horror flick that absolutely delivers the goods in terms of scaring its audience. But ultimately, this wannabe 1970s exploitation film doesn't rise above homage to be a classic horror effort that can stand right beside in quality, the films it most desires to emulate. There is no shame in that. This is Zombie's first film, and an ambitious one. *House of 1000 Corpses* is a good horror film, but the frustrating thing about it is that it gets near, at times, to a great one. It is probably heresy to state such a thing, but more Dr. Satan and less Firefly might have brought the film closer aligned to greatness, because comparisons to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* wouldn't be so readily apparent.

House of the Dead * ½

Critical Reception

"Here's a horror movie made by Uwe Boll, a German with more access to money than talent. Idiotically written, badly acted and directed, with Boll underlining the film's gory video game plot by intercutting video game effects into the slaughter, it's a staggering failure on pretty much every level."—Roger Moore, *Knight-Ridder Tribune Newspaper Services*, October 11, 2003.

"There's no suspense whatsoever, but there are a lot of 360-degree slo-mo pans of the sort in *The Matrix*, which only means the price for such effects has dropped drastically."—Ty Burr, *Boston Globe*, October 11, 2003.

"*House of the Dead* unimaginatively recycles all the teens-in-the-woods gorefest conventions: coitus interrupted by the killers; spooky houses into which pretty girls nervously venture alone; decapitations; cheesy effects; and leaden lines such as 'I have a bad feeling about this' to which members of the audience will undoubtedly unleash a collective 'Duh!'"—Loren King, *Chicago Tribune*, October 11, 2003.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jonathan Cherry (Rudy); Tyron Leitso (Simon); Clint Howard (Salish); Ona Grauer (Alicia); Ellie Cornell (Casper); Will Sanderson (Greg); Erika Okuma (Karma); Kira Clavell (Liberty); Sonja Salomaa (Cynthia); Michael Eklund (Hugh); David Palffy (Castillo); Jurgen Prochnow (Captain Kirk); Steve Byers (Matt); Erica Parker (Johanna); Birgit Stein (Lena); Adam Herrington (Rogan); Ben Derrick (McGivers); Biff Naked (DJ); Penny Phang (Tyranny); Kris Pope (Raver); Mashiah Vaughn-Hulbert (Flashing Woman).

CREW: Artisan Entertainment, Boll KG Productions, in association with Mindsfire Entertainment, Brightlight Pictures and Herold Productions, presents *House of the Dead*. Casting: Maureen Webb. Production Designer: Tink. Costume Designer: Lorraine Carson. Special Effects: WCT Productions, Toybox. Music: Reinhard Besser. Director of Photography: Matthias Neumann. Film Editor: David Richardson. Producers: Uwe Boll, Wolfgang Herold, Shawn Williamson. Executive Producers: Mark A. Altman, Dan Bates, Mark Gottwald, Dan Kletzky. Story by: Mark Altman and Dan Bates. Written by: Dave Parker and Mark Altman. Directed by: Uwe Boll. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of friends in Seattle hire a grizzled sea captain named Kirk (Prochnow) to transport them to a rave on a nearby island, the ghoulishly named "*Isla del Mort*." Unfortunately, when they arrive for the party, the friends learn that the revelers have been murdered and that the island has been overrun with zombies. Behind the zombie plague is an immortal Spaniard, Castillo Sermano (Palffy), who has created a serum that makes the living dead his servants. Now, the human survivors, including a police officer, Casper (Cornell), and Rudy (Cherry) must brave the island of the dead, and find a way home. Fortunately, Captain Kirk is a gun runner and has brought many, many guns to the island.

COMMENTARY: *House of the Dead* is a Uwe Boll film adapted from the popular Sega arcade game, which first came out in America in 1997. Players of the *House of the Dead* game aim guns at the arcade screen and blow up fast-moving zombies in a bid to combat the maniacal Dr. Curien. The game is fun and fast-moving, and can be quite harrowing, as zombies lurch and lunge at the screen/player in quick succession. The game is seen played, actually, in one of the horror films of the 2000s: *Children of the Corn: Revelation* (2001). This film version of the arcade game attempts to recreate the experience of *House of the Dead* with lots of gunplay, fast-moving action, and violence. But despite occasionally stylish touches and abundant energy, the movie emerges as stupid and campy.

House of the Dead is well-cast with genre vets such as Jurgen Prochnow, Ellie Cornell, and Clint Howard leading the way. Their presence, however, does little to alleviate the moronic dialogue, or situations that weight the film experience down. Widely reviled upon its release, *House of the Dead* is bad indeed, but perhaps not quite as terrible as some critics said. A sincere attempt was made to translate the video game to a different medium, but aspects of the film, from performance and screenplay to tone, genuinely miss the mark.

To the plus, *House of the Dead* is virtually non-stop action. And the action is rendered in a creative way. Basically, in the midst of violent action scenes, with zombies overrunning and terrorizing the human characters, Boll cuts to what can only be termed beauty shots of the protagonists as they leap into the air, and the camera spins around them, 360 degrees, in slow motion. It is music-video-esque in conception, but also a neat variation of *The Matrix*'s bullet-time, that captures the anarchic and fast-moving spirit of the source material. Accompanied by pounding, percussion-heavy music, these instances of so-called "Bolle-t" time are funny, inventive, and original. They break up the tension of the scenes but are a welcome stylistic touch. These hero shots are a corollary for the images in games when players get to select a hero, before launching into action.

Unfortunately, outside the camera acrobatics, the film doesn't have much to offer, and what it does offer is pandering. The gore is over the top and ridiculous in execution, meant to appeal to a certain demographic that sees horror films just to be repulsed, or disgusted. For example, characters, when tugged on by zombies, pull apart very easily. These moments tend to take away from the reality of the situation. Similarly, there are multiple scenes in the film that gawk at topless females, again indicating a desire to appeal to a lowest-common denominator faction of the horror population. This is a shame because Mark A. Altman is such a smart writer, and his script, with the jokes about Captain Kirk for instance, are indicative of a post-modern or meta approach to the material, which could have granted the film a greater level of intelligence had it been matched with a directorial vision of some intellect.

Video games are tough to adapt to screen, and both this film and *Doom* (2005) seek and fail to adapt a first-person shooter to the cinema. That style of game is action heavy, short on story (as opposed, for instance, to a horror survival game such as *Resident Evil* or *Silent Hill*), but adrenaline-provoking. One can detect how *House of the Dead* attempts to mirror that approach with the pounding music, the guns blaring, and the acrobatic camerawork. If this approach had been married to more three-dimensional performances, and a less leering approach to tits and gore, the film might have been a stronger one

LEGACY: A TV sequel aired on the Sci-Fi Channel in 2006, without Uwe Boll at the helm.

Identity * * ½

Critical Reception

"While there is much to admire in the artistry and craft that went into the making of this film, its use of the theme of multiple personality is exploitative and unsatisfying. It relies essentially on clichéd and derogatory images of the dangerous mentally ill. It takes highly distorted caricatures of multiple personality solely for the purpose of a plot device. This undermines the integrity of the story, and the ending even resorts to a cheap horror tactic. Ultimately, the film is a disappointment; the complexity of the story and the quality of the acting are dragged down by this objectionable portrayal of insanity."—Christian Perring, PhD., *Premiacare*, January 7, 2004.

"This is one of the most cleverly constructed thrillers of the last decade, and entertaining enough to hold up on second viewing, when you already know what's going to happen."—Eric Snider, *MTV*, June 30, 2012.

"I'm a sucker for a good twist and this one made up for every cliché the film threw at us. I didn't see it coming and I LOVE to have the rug pulled from under me."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: John Cusack (Ed); Ray Liotta (Rhodes); Amanda Peet (Paris); John Hawkes (Larry); Alfred Molina (Dr. Malick); Clea DuVall (Ginny); John C. McGinley (George York); William Scott Lee (Lou); Jake Busey (Robert Maine); Pruitt Taylor Vince (Malcolm Rivers); Rebecca De Mornay (Caroline Suzanne); Carmen Argenziano (Defense Lawyer); Marshall Bell (District Attorney).

CREW: Columbia Pictures and Konrad Pictures present *Identity*. Casting: Lisa Beach, Sarah Katzman. Production Designer: Mark Friedberg. Costume Designer: Arianne Phillips. Special Effects: CIS Hollywood, CafeFX, Digital Backlot, KNB EFX Group, Sony Pictures Imagework, Computercave. Music: Alan Silvestri. Director of Photography: Phedon Papamichael. Film Editor: David Brenner. Producer: Cathy Konrad. Executive Producer: Stuart Besser. Written by: Michael Cooney. Directed by: James Mangold. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: As an insane serial killer, Malcolm Rivers (Pruitt) is prepped for execution by the state at a competency hearing in the middle of the night, a group of individuals seek shelter from a storm at an out-of-the-way motel. Among these who end up there are Ed (Cusack), an ex-cop, now professional driver, a down-on-her-luck con-woman, Paris Nevada (Peet), a correctional officer named Rhodes (Liotta), and his prisoner (Busey), and a family man, whose wife has been mortally wounded in a car accident. Before long, these individuals are murdered in brutal fashion. The desk-clerk at the hotel (Hawkes) is one suspect, but a young woman (DuVall) suggests the murder have a supernatural origin because the hotel was built over the tombs of a long-gone Native American tribe.

COMMENTARY: *Identity* is a well-cast, exceptionally photographed film that seeks to cheekily redefine the term “psychological” horror. It was successful at the box office and was met with acclaim by many critics, and yet the film finally just doesn’t come together in any manner that the average viewer would find satisfying. On the contrary, the third act twist disappoints terribly. Accordingly, the film, which is so promising in premise and execution in its first two acts, ultimately crumbles by the time it reaches the sting in the tail. It’s very much the same situation that also scuttled Alexandre Aja’s *High Tension*. Technical skill and ingenuity ultimately can’t surmount a final twist that feels like a cheat.

Written by Michael Cooney, *Identity* commences knowingly with a famous cliché for its setting: the “dark and stormy night.” From there it introduces diverse, apparently unconnected characters seeking a respite from a ferocious storm in a rundown, out of the way motel (a common setting in the 2000s; see: *Vacancy* [2007]). Opening with a fine sense of mystery and horror, *Identity* starts strong. It literally opens with a bang in moments that are both shocking and visceral. A car accident involving McGinley’s character is staged with aplomb, for maximum harrowing impact. The story then moves back and forth between characters, deconstructing time, events and causality in a way that stimulates the imagination and makes the audience wonder how all the pieces are going to fit together.

And then the audience finds out.

It is revealed that all the characters at the motel are individual facets of Malcolm Rivers’ twisted mind. He possesses a “fractured psyche” and suffers from “*Disassociative Identity Disorder*.” In other words, all those personalities at the motel are his various internal personalities. The problem, of course is that the human mind is not a motel, nor a dark and stormy night. And those disparate personalities, however they exist inside Malcolm, are not sentient and operating with one another in one concrete reality. The attempt to make an internal mental reality or landscape mirror our external reality doesn’t pass the smell test.

Worse, the attempts to throw the audience off the scent of the truth are tricky, but not really fair either. At one point, characters flee the motel and attempt to find help and sanctuary elsewhere. They end up back at the motel, realizing they dwell in a closed or pocket universe, essentially, where the motel is all.

But why would the killer’s mind work this way?

Why not have the personalities experience any reality they wish or desire? Why is does the brains' reality manifest as an out of the way motel? The personalities all covet things like money, but what value does money have in an unreal, mental world of the imagination?

Ultimately, director Mangold can't provide the rousing or even satisfactory third act that the tense and brooding opening seems to promise. All the stylish freeze-frames and flashbacks early on fail to support the movie's final sting in the tail.

In other words, none of it makes sense at the end.

The feelings of dread throughout the film are strong, but the end twist is a complete and total cheat. The movie wants the audience to believe all the characters are real, when they aren't. The problem is that their story is infinitely more intriguing and fascinating than the story of Rivers, a ward of the state and murderer of six people, and his fractured psyche.

Even the twist's execution leaves something to be desired, at least from a structural standpoint. An important discovery by Cusack's Ed literally sucks the life out of the film. Once the truth is revealed, and the audience knows these characters are not characters are all, but figments of a deranged individual's mentality, it matters not at all what becomes of them.

Suspense withers on the vine.

At one point in the film, the Jean Paul Sartre treatise *Being and Nothingness* is seen on camera. The problem with *Identity* is that it brings all the characters, as played by Cusack, Peet, Liotta and Hawkes into being with real skill and interest, abut then leaves the audience, after the trick, wallowing in nothingness.

Identity is gimmicky and, finally, too tricky to cohere.

Jeepers Creepers 2 * * *

Critical Reception

"...*Jeepers Creepers 2* is a brisk, sometimes exhilarating sequel that conjures up enough surprises, genuine jolts and well-crafted action scenes to make you forget it wasn't supposed to be this good. Writer-director Victor Salvo, who directed the first *Jeepers Creepers*, wisely keeps the action and story simple, focusing mostly on the kids in the bus. That sets up many unexpected hair-raising moments and an exciting showdown."—Vince Horiuchi, *Salt Lake Tribune*: "Jeepers! Sequel is creepier than the original." August 29, 2003, page D3.

"While it may not deliver the early jolt of the first one, No. 2 compensates with a sustained sense of suspense and a group of attractive young players not doing a lot of the things we're used to seeing attractive young players do in today's horror pictures, and actually raising a social issue or two as well."—John Wooley, *Tulsa World*, August 29, 2003.

"*Jeepers Creepers 2* is dull, doesn't have the ham-handed exposition of the first film, but isn't as good as the first film so if you need to watch one, watch the first one. The first film had two great leads. There are way too many characters in this film, none of them written (or performed) as well as those from the first film. This movie tries to make up for its lack of depth with action—and did not succeed.

Jeepers Creepers 2 should have been a prequel, taking place 23 years before the first film. That would have worked (provided you established the setting correctly in 1978, and why, oh, why couldn't they just have done that?). For anybody interested in trying to figure out the timeline of the *Jeepers Creepers* films, all three of them take place in the same week. The third film takes place between the first two. There are bookend scenes from *Jeepers Creepers 3* from 1978 and 2024, but, sigh, *Jeepers Creepers* established a seriously good monster—it was like a cowboy version of Pumpkinhead's mating with a Gargoyle—and this is the series we got. There should be professional mythology builders out there who can be hired by film companies who don't know how to steer their own properties, and I'll personally chip in money to help this production company get this stuff right (start by leaving director/writer Victor Salva, who is creepy in his own right, out of the mix).

Jeepers Creepers 2 is better than *Jeepers Creepers 3*. Forewarned is forearmed."—William Latham, author of

Cast & Crew

CAST: Ray Wise (Taggart); Justin Long (Darry); Jonathan Breck (The Creeper); Gorikayi Mutambirwa (Double D); Eric Nenninger (Scott Braddock); Nicki Aycox (Minxie Hayes); Travis Schiffner (Izzy Bohen); Lena Cardwell (Chelsea Farmer); Billy Aaron Brown (Andy "Bucky" Buck); Mariah Delfino (Rhonda Truitt); Diane Delano (Bus Driver Betty); Thom Gossom, Jr. (Coach Charlie Hanna); Tom Tarantini (Coach Dwayne Barnes); Al Santos (Dante Belasco); Josh Hammond (Jake Spencer); Luke Edwards (Jack Taggart, Jr.); Shawn Fleming (Billy Taggart); Jon Powell (Older Jack, Jr.);

CREW: United Artists, American Zoetrope Pictures and Myriad Pictures presents *Jeepers Creepers 2*. Casting: Aaron Griffin, Linda Phillips-Palo. Production Designer: Peter Jamison. Costume Designer: Jana Stern. Music: Bennett Salvay. Director of Photography: Don E. Fauntleroy. Film Editor: Ed Marx. Producer: Tom Luse. Executive Producers: Francis Ford Coppola, Bobby Rock, Kirk D'Amico, Lucas Foster. Written and Directed by: Victor Salva. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Every 23rd spring, for 23 days, a demon walks the Earth, able to feed, and replenish its wounded body parts by eating replacement human parts. Just four days after the Creeper took Darry (Long), it continues its inhuman spree. After taking the son of a farmer, Taggart (Wise) in a wheat field, the Creeper waylays a high school athletic team on a school bus trip, on a lonely highway. As the jocks and cheerleaders attempt to survive the attack, Taggart plans revenge against the monster that took his boy.

COMMENTARY: Again, a lot of folks don't like or approve of Victor Salva, or his movies, because of his criminal past, and his unsavory and illegal conduct with minors. The popular *Jeepers Creepers* movies have thus become the vehicle in which to debate the messenger, but not necessarily the message (in this case, the film).

So again, Victor Salva?

He was punished for his despicable crimes by the legal system and has paid his debt to society.

Jeepers Creepers 2? A pretty good horror movie.

The second observation is in no way an excuse or apology for the director's behavior, just a notation that the director has crafted, for the second time, an effective scare machine.



That's not a scarecrow. The Creeper returns in *Jeepers Creepers 2* (2003).

As noted in the review of the first *Jeepers Creepers*, Salva knows horror, and knows it well. Here, he adroitly plays on the “carnage candy” rule enunciated in *Scream 2* (1997) which applies to franchise sequels. In particular, the rule states that in sequels to popular horror films, the body count is always higher, and the death scenes are much more elaborate. Both of those observations are true here, as the Creeper returns to decimate a full busload of high school teenagers.

This time, Salva also adds a Dr. Loomis-like authority figure to the proceedings, giving the Creeper a memorable nemesis. Ray Wise does a great job with the role of Taggart, playing an Ahab-like character out to take down the demon, with a harpoon, of all things. Gina Phillips would have been a great choice to play a similar character, Trish, acting out of vengeance for the murder of Darry, but that idea, apparently wasn't in the cards. Justin Long recreates his role from the first movie, in this instance as a

Cassandra-like spirit, warning the presence and history of the always-hungry monster.

On a more literal level, Salva demonstrates his horror film knowledge by having his characters voice dialogue from well-known horror films. The line “*elbows and assholes*” from *Aliens* (1986) resurfaces, and that film is a key example of carnage candy, featuring more monsters, more deaths, and more elaborate “carnage candy.” Another character notes “*You gotta be fucking kidding me,*” a line which recalls John Carpenter’s *The Thing*.

What’s new this time is a social conscience and theme is woven into the film’s visual tapestry. Salva capably makes a visual case in the film for dark forces subverting wholesome America. *Jeepers Creepers 2* opens with a wheat field bathed in golden light, and midwestern, family farm. It could be Clark Kent’s home it so picturesque. A young boy, Billy, plays in this realm of safety, the American heartland, and then is snatched suddenly away in a terrifying moment. Later, the yellow school bus, the athletes, and the cheerleaders similarly symbolize small-town America and its rites and pastimes. And here too, Americana is attacked. One might gaze at these Norman Rockwell type images and the ensuing violent attacks as a commentary on 9/11, the awakening from a peaceful slumber into a more violent world.

Or, again, knowing Salva’s history, the attack on these symbols—and in both cases America’s youth—may be a subconscious or undercover response to his own nature and past as a predator. The Creeper again stalks the unsuspecting, the youthful, and the innocent, and this time the film’s imagery more overtly points that out. The jocks for instance, are constantly referenced in terms of their “*swinging dicks*,” or noted as being “*cocks of the walk*.” On one hand this suggests the Creeper’s power, overturning the power schema of high school (where athletes pretty much rule the roost). On the other hand, these comments, as well as the frequent male nudity in the film, position men—adolescent boys—as the prey (and indeed, sexual prey) of the Creeper.

And this time, the Creeper has a weird vagina that opens up on his nose.

Jeepers Creepers 2 is also filmed with an abundance of style. Much of the film plays out like an odd siege film. The athletes and cheerleaders are trapped on a bus, on a highway in, approximately, the middle of nowhere. The bus is their sanctuary, playing the same role as the farmhouse in Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), or the police station in John Carpenter’s *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976). The tight quarters on a bus at night might give some filmmakers pause about utilizing it as a horror film’s central setting. But Salva goes for the gusto, and overdoses on style. For instance, he stages a long pullback away from the bus, with the kids peering frightenedly out of the back windows, and the imagery stresses the entrapment and isolation of the victims.

One of the last horror films to premiere in theaters before 9/11, the first *Jeepers Creepers* still had a late 1990s vibe. The film started out as if the Creeper were actually a serial killer, not a monster. He was seen driving a truck (whereas in the sequel he flies) and building a corpse artwork in the basement of the Old Church. The sequel appropriately finds currency in 2000s era tropes and culture instead. In addition to serving as a sanctuary for the siege, the school bus is a microcosm for America and its red/blue divisions, circa 2002. The kids on the both are black and white, gay and straight, and they argue, bicker, sacrifice and betray one another, depending on the moment. In particular, the teens degenerate into pointing fingers at each other, wondering which of them the monster desires. They look for reasons that their classmates and friends are bad or should be handed over to the monster.

The early 2000s was the era that politicians seized on so-called “wedge” issues like abortion, gun control and gay marriage to divide America into those blue states and red states. People began to question who is the real American, instead of acknowledging that red and blue state residents are all Americans, for better or for worse. Incubated on a steady diet of toxic Fox News, Americans began to see their countrymen and women as being their enemies if they didn’t share the same ideology, or support for a particular candidate.

That very idea is reflected in *Jeepers Creepers 2* in the make-up of the students, and the fact that the Creeper “wants” some, and not others. “*When people get scared, it’s like they get drunk ... the real person comes to the surface,*” one student notes, as tempers flare. The danger of the situation has caused ugly divides, of race, gender and orientation, to boil over on the bus. Some of the kids attempt to assert order in the chaos, noting “*We don’t know who it picked. It looked at everyone,*” making a case that all are in the

same boat, or the same bus. But others want to, literally, throw their friends under the bus so they can survive.

Again, if one goes back to the farmhouse in *Night of the Living Dead*, one sees how the people trapped there represented different aspects and demographics of American society, to reveal it was more splintered and divided than it might at first appear. *Jeepers Creepers 2* uses the bus to much the same effect.

Intriguingly, the Creeper's life cycle also contemplates the cyclical nature of justice and division in America. "*It doesn't matter what you do*," a character states, meaningfully, during the action. "*It'll be back. Twenty-three years from now.*"

This is not a small or unimportant statement. In the 2000s, America was enmeshed in a foreign war, and a foreign quagmire again, having forgotten the lessons of Vietnam, 25 years earlier. Civil Rights for disenfranchised individuals, whether immigrants or gay people hoping to be legally wed, were again a topic roiling the country. Although the 1980s had been the era of yuppies and conspicuous consumption, by the 2000s, poverty in America had not been conquered, leading to presidential candidate John Edwards' speech about there really being "*two Americas*." Bush's early acts as President seemed to mirror Reagan's a generation earlier: giant tax cuts for the rich. Even in horror movies, old ideas—quarter century old ideas—were being revived and regurgitated in the form of remakes. Some of the "repeated" history is downright bizarre. The space shuttle Challenger exploded in 1986. Twenty-seven years later, another space shuttle blew up, the Columbia.

In its own way, *Jeepers Creepers 2* suggests this cycle of repetition. The Creeper keeps coming up back, threatening America, even as America appears to change. This film offers as its final survivors a black man, a woman, and a possibly gay journalist, a trio that wouldn't have made the cut, perhaps in the 1970s.

Now, as this book is being written, the next (fictional) go-round for the Creeper is coming, in 2024. And have things changed in America? For the better or for worse? Or are we simply repeating the same unresolved history? In 2020, leading up to the national election, we have another Republican president in office who lost the popular vote (as Bush did), and racial hurts are more apparent than ever. The Confederate flag is a key issue of the society, as it was in 2000. And nationally, we have a president who has grossly mismanaged a crisis. Not a hurricane or foreign war in this case, but a pandemic in which, to harken back to *Jeepers Creepers 2*, characters must stand up and say "*nobody gets to decide that we die*" as craven politicians rush to put the economy over the health of the nation's people.

Every 23 years, and for considerably more than 23 days, we seem to have to learn the same hard lessons and fight the same creepers all over again.

Leprechaun 6: Back 2 Tha Hood (DTV) ★ ★

Cast & Crew

CAST: Warwick Davis (Lubdan/Leprechaun); Tangi Miller (Emily Woodrow); Laz Alonso (Rory); Page Kennedy (Jamie Davis); Sherrie Jackson (Lisa Duncan); Donzaleigh Abernathy (Esmeralda); Sheik Mahmud-Bay (Watson); Sticky Fingaz (Cedric); Keesha Sharp (Chanel); Sonya Eddy (Yolanda); Beau Bellingslea (Thompson); Chris Murray (Whitaker); Vickilyn Reynolds (Doria); Willie C. Carpenter (Father Jacob).

CREW: Lions Gate Entertainment presents *Leprechaun 6: Back 2 Tha Hood*. Casting: Anne McCarthy, Jay Scully. Production Designer: Nanci Bennett. Costume Designer: Katherine Swartz. Special Effects: Atlantic West Effects, The Post Group. Music: Michael Whittaker. Director of Photography: David Daniel. Film Editor: Stephen H. Sloan. Producer: Mike Upton. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Phyllis Cedar. Characters by: Mark Jones. Written and Directed by: Steven Ayromlooi. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Myth of the One is the story of Lubdan, the Leprechaun who did not return to his home country, and instead hid his gold at the end of a rainbow. In this case, that rainbow ends in Los Angeles. A priest, Father Jacob (Carpenter) finds the gold and sets out to make a youth center for the local children. A year later, Jacob is dead, and the youth center remains unfinished. Local teenagers Emily (Miller), and Lisa (Jackson), along with their boyfriends unexpectedly find the Leprechaun's gold when Emily falls through the ground on the youth center site and discovers a subterranean room with the riches. The teens set out to spend all the Leprechaun's money, unaware that the monster is now hunting them to recover his gold. The Leprechaun gives chase to the youth, but they have a weapon on their side: bullets forged from four leaf clovers.

COMMENTARY: As the review for *Leprechaun 5: Leprechaun in the Hood* points out, there are two kinds of Leprechaun movies at this time, neither entirely satisfactory. There are the campy, over-the-top joke movies, like *Leprechaun in Space* and *Leprechaun in the Hood*. And then there are the entries that at least make a token attempt to be scary. The latter type still features laughs, but also more straightforward horror narratives. The first film in the saga fits into this type, as does this last entry, *Back 2 Tha Hood*, the last *Leprechaun* film to star Warwick Davis in the titular role. This film's predecessor, *Leprechaun in the Hood* was a series of sketches in search of a narrative, not to mention a depressing reflection of what some people believe modern African American culture looks like: "gangstas," "motherfucker"-styled language, excessive bling, and guns. Lots of guns. The movie was an insult to the intelligence and plays like a modern minstrel show.

Back 2 Tha Hood is a step up, though not a big step up, because at least the filmmakers don't disrespect the culture, or, apparently, themselves. To start, this sequel features an appealing lead, Tangi Miller, who asks herself "why do our lives have to be like this?" When she discovers the gold, it is a ladder out of the poverty and crime she sees around her. However, she and her friend don't spend money on college, or a home, or something that could remove them from the urban blight seen around them. Instead they focus on superficial, but understandable teen desires: a new car, and new clothes. Emily is likable and relatable, and the audience wants to see her succeed in life, unlike the jokesters in the previous film, who were played mostly for laughs.

There is also a moral underpinning here. Emily and her friends, despite taking the gold and spending it, realize that stealing is wrong, and attempt to undo their crime. The Leprechaun tells them, nevertheless, "You're going to Hell with all the others who stole from that chest." Another line also captures this thought: too: "You compromised all you believed in when you got the gold." There is an attempt, then, to impose a moral sense of order on the Leprechaun universe here, which makes sense. His victims are always folks who have stolen from him. So, while his punishment is excessive, there is a moral underpinning suggested, and perhaps a critique of capitalism as well. People die in the film, and Emily is left to wonder, "was it all worth it?"

This sixth entry in the series also takes the *Terminator* series as a narrative model, so that it is, in a way, a chase and pursuit horror film, with the Leprechaun always one step behind Emily and her friends. There has also been an attempt to make the film legitimately scary. It doesn't work, but again, at least the filmmakers were trying. There is one scene here in which Lubdan rips a gold tooth out of a character's mouth, and pulls out her whole lower jaw, and that's certainly an attempt to put the terror back in the Leprechaun character. Later, there is a scene in which, like the Terminator, the Leprechaun steals a police cruiser, but in a twist, his feet won't reach the car pedals.

Even the film's opening and closing, which contextualizes this film as Chapter 6 of the Book of Leprechaun, the "Myth of the One" is a welcome attempt to impose some consistent mythology on a truly scattershot and inconsistent film franchise.

The conventional wisdom on *Back 2 Tha Hood* is that it is an inferior death knell for the long-standing (and mostly DTV) *Leprechaun* series, but in terms of quality, it actually ranks higher than either of the previous two entries. It's not as outrageous and silly, for certain, but it makes an attempt to re-ground the series in horror, and even if it doesn't always succeed, the attempt to move from

intelligence-insulting sketch comedy to genuine genre thrills is welcome. If the *Leprechaun* series, like Emily in this film, “compromised all” it believed in when the first film became a hit, this movie is an attempt, at least, at redemption.

LEGACY: Two further entries in the *Leprechaun* series, though without the presence of foundational star Warwick Davis, have appeared since this film was released. They are: *Leprechaun: Origins* (2014) and *Leprechaun Returns* (2018).

Mimic 3: Sentinel (DTV) * * 1/2

Cast & Crew

CAST: Lance Henriksen (Garbagecan); Karl Geary (Marvin Montrose); Alexis Dziena (Rosy Montrose); Keith Robinson (Desmond); Tudorel Filimon (Birdman); Rebecca Mader (Carmen); Maria Oprea (Ma Bell); Mircea Constantinescu (Mr. Pasture); Mircea Anca, Jr. (Noah Pasture); Amanda Plummer (Simon Montrose); John Kapelos (Detective Gary Dumas); Ion Haiduc (Moustache); Nicolae Constantiu.

CREW: Dimension Films, Neo Art & Logic, Buena Vista and Dimension Films present *Mimic 3: Sentinel*. Casting: Carrie Hilton, Karen Meisels, Adrienne Stern. Production Designer: Cristi Niculescu. Costume Designer: Oana Paunescu. Special Effects: Jamison Scott Goei, iO FILM. Music: Henning Lohner. Director of Photography: Alexandru Sterian. Film Editor: Kirk M. Morri. Producers: Keith Border, Ron Schmidt. Executive Producers: Vlad Paunescu, Nick Phillips, Andrew Rona. Written by: J.T. Petty. Directed by: J.T. Petty. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 77 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A former sufferer of Stickler’s Disease, Marvin (Geary) has grown up and is now living in his broken family’s urban apartment. To pass the time, he takes photos of the strange denizens on the street below his window. The young man soon sees passersby being murdered by a stranger and comes to realize that the Mimic creatures that were thought dead are not yet extinct.

COMMENTARY: A step down from the direct-to-video *Mimic 2*, which was some kind of brilliantly twisted story of predatory behavior in both human and insect males, *Mimic 3: Sentinel* is nonetheless another unconventional entry in this series. The film may not be great, or even good, overall, but it certainly has some amorphous mood or quality that renders it memorable.

As *Mimic 3: Sentinel*’s director J.T. Petty has reported in interviews, this direct-to-video film basically appropriates the plot of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954), and concerns a (young) man who doesn’t truly experience the world. Instead Marvin lives vicariously and voyeuristically through his camera.

In both films, a voyeur sees evidence of a crime, or a monster, outside his cloistered world. Here, Marvin is both “*environmentally hypersensitive*” and emotionally stunted, rather than confined to a wheelchair over a temporary injury. Marvin has an inhaler to help him breathe, as one of the last children to contract Stickler’s Disease, but no one is really helping him live. He lives in the tiny, sequestered world of the camera, and his wall of photographs. The film lives there too, which may be the crux of the bad reviews.

Apparently made on a shoestring, *Mimic 3: Sentinel* is ultra-deliberate in its pacing, and some adrenaline-seeking horror fans will be put off by that fact. Also, as noted above, most of the film takes place in one room, in Marvin’s apartment, further limiting exposure to typical genre stimuli. And yet Geary, who plays Marvin, is a compelling and oddball performer, and he manages to make the character reasonably intriguing. It feels a bit like Marvin is on the Autism spectrum too, and if the film is viewed in that light, it becomes even more interesting for its observations about a post-Judas Breed world. Some viewers will no doubt object to the fact that Marvin sees people attacked and doesn’t really help,

but again, he's limited by the physical condition, and I suspect, He doesn't really feel like he belongs in his family, or anywhere for that matter, except behind the viewfinder of his camera.

What seems most intriguing about the film, shot in Romania, is that it carries over from *Mimic 2* the same brand of world-weary, exhausted vibe, both in its limited camera movement, and often its autumnal color scheme. For lack of a better term, one might call this aesthetic, "After the World Has Ended" and it recurs throughout the 2000s, including in films such as the American remake of *Dark Water* (2005). Here's there's a feeling, from the sparse streets and sidewalks, and the ever-present night, that the world in *Mimic* is ending not with the first film's bang, but with a lengthy, drawn-out whimper. This sequel was released in 2003, so it arrived well after the Millennial fin-de-siècle films, and yet it feels like there is an element of that tone here (and in the second film too). It is clear that Del Toro's *Mimic* is still the main event in the saga, and that its two sequels are like these strange, anti-climactic—but intensely focused and fascinating—codas or half-lives.

If viewed on those terms, both direct-to-video sequels offer something of interest. *Mimic 2* possesses a full-blown, artistically integrated argument comparing toxic men to toxic bugs, and also appears to have had a bit more in terms of resources to work with. *Mimic 3* is really a film about this forgotten, poor family, and this sick kid, Marvin, eking it out in a place that the world seems to have abandoned, or shunned.

The 2000s horror star and most valuable player, Lance Henriksen is on hand for a while too, as the enigmatic "Garbage man" but doesn't get much of interest to do. Even some of the film's killings take place off-screen, and Petty deigns only to show the bloody aftermath, again contributing to this sense of the action occurring in a world that is already half-dead, or more. It mostly works.

If viewers tune into this third *Mimic* film, the best way to approach it is to think of it in these atmospheric terms, rather than expecting big thrills, suspense, and monsters. All of those qualities would seem to be necessary in any *Mimic* film, and yet *Mimic 3: Sentinel* almost succeeds without them. In the final analysis, the mood and the lead performance can't entirely carry the day, and the snail's pace action proves difficult to commit to and laud. This is a film one can appreciate on an abstract and artistic level, perhaps, if willing to go the distance and fully invest in the aesthetic, but which doesn't easily seize the heart the way giant, man-imitating insects would.

The Mothman Prophecies ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"There's less—much less—than meets the eye to *The Mothman Prophecies*, which comes to us with the portentous note that it is 'based on true events.' Pellington, director of the underrated *Arlington Road*, knows how to create tension just by moving his camera in an unexpected direction but, after a while, you begin to see through the tricks and realize there isn't much going on here."—Marshall Fine, *The Journal News*, January 2002.

"In a way, *The Mothman Prophecies* succeeds because of what it is not. It is not, for instance, a standard off-the-shelf horror movie, loaded with silly digital effects and splashed with buckets of stage blood. It also is not a by-the-numbers psychological thriller, in which the handsome hero wraps up the loose ends in the final 10 minutes. In fact, I'm not exactly sure how to categorize *The Mothman Prophecies*. But whatever it is, we certainly could use some more. Instead of traveling a familiar road, director Mark Pellington (*Arlington Road*) takes this film in new and fascinating directions, combining inspired art direction with deft pacing and a delicate touch with the camera. The result is a riveting hybrid, combining a horror film with a love story and a whodunit."—Bill Muller, *Arizona Republic*, January 2002.

"*The Mothman Prophecies* is stylistically a brilliant piece of filmmaking. Tight close-ups, imaginative camera angles, beautifully framed scenes and plenty of foreshadowing (look for pairs of glowing red objects in numerous scenes portending Mothman's famous red eyes) all create a distinctive feel."—Rusty Marks, *The Charleston Gazette*, January 31, 2002.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Richard Gere (John Klein); Debra Messing (Mary Klein); Will Patton (Gordon Smallwood); Laura Linney (Connie Mills); Alan Bates (Alexander Leek); David Eigenberg (Ed Fleischman); Bob Tracey (Cyrus Bills); Yvonne Erickson (Dr. McElroy); Lucinda Jenney (Denise Smallwood); Billy Mott (Otto); Ann McDonough (Lucy Griffin); Shane Callhan (Nat Griffin); Dan Callhan (C.J.); Nesbitt Blaisdell (Chief Josh Jarrett); Rohn Thomas (Dr. Williams); Bill Laing (Indrid Cold); Mark Pellington (Voice of Indrid Cold).

CREW: Sony Pictures Entertainment, Screen Gems and Lakeshore Entertainment present *The Mothman Prophecies*. Casting: Sheila Jaffe, Georgianne Walken. Production Designer: Richard Hoover. Costume Designer: Susan Lyall. Special Effects: Cinesite, Fantasy II Film Effects, yU+Co. Music: Tomandandy. Director of Photography: Fred Murphy. Film Editor: Brian Berdan. Producers: Gary Goldstein, Gary Lucchesi, Tom Rosenberg. Executive Producers: Terry A. McKay, Ted Tannebaum, Richard S. Wright. Based on the novel by: John A. Keel. Written by: Richard Hatem. Directed by: Mark Pellington. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 119 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: John Klein (Gere) and his wife, Mary (Messing), prepare for a happy Christmas season, and put in an offer on a dream house they hope to purchase. A strange car accident, however, changes their fates. Just before the accident, Mary sees two glowing red eyes in the darkness, and then wrecks the car. At the hospital, however, an MRI reveals that Mary is suffering from a terminal brain tumor. Two years after Mary's death, a still-grieving John decides to drive to Richmond to visit a governor with presidential aspirations. Mysteriously, however, he ends up not in Virginia, but in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, almost on the Ohio border. There, his car breaks down and when John asks for help from a twitchy local, he finds that the man, Gordon (Patton), claims to have seen him at the same time for the past three nights. The local police sheriff, Connie (Linney), arrives to defuse the tense situation, and reports to Klein that strange things have been occurring in town for a few months. Several denizens of Point Pleasant have reported seeing a large, moth-like biped. Others have received strange telephone messages from an individual named Indrid Cold, perhaps the Mothman himself. John investigates and comes to believe that Mary's death is in some way connected to the Mothman sightings, Point Pleasant, and Indrid Cold. Soon, Gordon begins receiving predictions of disaster from Indrid Cold, predictions that prove frighteningly accurate. When Indrid calls John and warns him of great danger on "the river Ohio," John is convinced he knows the answer.

COMMENTARY: In the closing months of 1966 and throughout most of 1967, the residents of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, reported to the authorities and local newspapers seeing a strange creature in their formerly quiet town, a so-called "*Mothman*." The sightings ceased after the catastrophic collapse of the Silver Bridge on December 15, 1967, which had connected Ohio to Mason County, W.V.



Is there some dark force watching over humanity and his fate? That's the question of *The Mothman Prophecies* (2003). Top: investigative reporter John Klein (Richard Gere) receives a phone call from the mysterious Indrid

Cold. Bottom: John (Gere) faces himself in a motel room mirror, but is something else actually staring back?

In 1975, journalist and UFOlogist John Keel (1930–2009) wrote a book concerning the strange Mothman sightings of a decade earlier, as well as the other supernatural or paranormal events surrounding the tragedy. Director Mark Pellington and the other creators of the 2003 film adaptation of Keel's work, *The Mothman Prophecies*, had a choice to make. They could either craft a monster movie about a cryptid, *an eight-foot moth-biped creature with glowing red eyes*, or a much more scintillating narrative revolving around a truly horrifying subject: *human mortality*. The filmmakers chose the latter course, and in doing so, forged one of the most challenging and cerebral horror films of the 2000s.

The subject of human mortality finds voice early in *The Mothman Prophecies* when the lead character, John Klein (Richard Gere), comments on how it feels to lose a loved one, his wife (Debra Messing), to disease. He notes: "*The universe just points at you and says 'there you are: a happy couple. I was looking for you.'*" Communicated in this nice little line of dialogue is an essential aspect of life on this mortal coil. Without knowledge, without insight, humans attempt to impose order—even the order of the Gods, or God Himself—upon events which seem inexplicable or driven by random fate. When those we love are hurt or die, we feel *personally* targeted, or victimized. Like, as John expresses, the cosmos itself somehow has it in for us. We are God's playthings, it appears. From that single line of dialogue, *The Mothman Prophecies* weaves an intriguing, and often downright terrifying tale of what it might be like should some mysterious entity, *a surrogate for that universe pointing its finger at us*, possess those answers, and try to communicate them with us.

Would we understand the messages? Would we understand the messenger? Could he understand us?

The Mothman Prophecies proves such a dynamic horror film, however, because Pellington crafts unsettling and resonant imagery to express the spine-tingling sense of uncertainty about the Mothman, his origin, and the breadth of his powers. These visual compositions suggest a higher or perhaps just different order of life, and the impossibility of man interfacing with it in a meaningful fashion. Pellington utilizes extreme high-angle shots, the God's Eye Shot, for instance, to suggest a viewpoint outside of human dimensions, and a strange visual leitmotif to boot: a bizarre image of symbol which resembles a "Y" to represent disaster. This "Y" symbol might also be stated to resemble a moth in flight, its wings flapping above its trunk. These and other visuals create the not-very-pleasant impression that man shares the world with beings beyond his sight, and beyond his understanding. Ones who may answer the question "*why me?*" in ways that threaten our very perspectives on life, mortality, and "order."



More imagery from *The Mothman Prophecies* (2003). Top: Mary Klein (Debra Messing) and John Klein (Richard Gere) confront a strange mystery involving life and death. Bottom: John Klein (Gere) attempts to stop a prophecy about a disaster on a bridge on the Ohio River.

The Mothman Prophecies revolves around the notion of sight. Human beings have sight of Earth at the “ground level.” They see those they love and the things that happen to them, but don’t always have or get the answers that they seek about them. *Why does someone we love end up on a train that derails?* One can determine the scientific reason for the train’s destruction, but not the twist of fate that led a loved one to the accident, and their final reckoning with mortality. The same goes for car-crashes, brain cancer, or any other heartache. Human sight in such circumstances is limited to grief. When our loved ones die, we react personally, and feel targeted.

In terms of historical context, *The Mothman Prophecies* was released just months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, while many Americans were still processing and expressing these very emotions. At the time, there were many press accounts regarding survivors who decided not to fly that fateful morning, or who didn’t go to work at the World Trade Centers that day, for some mysterious motive.

Why were they spared, when others were not?

A concrete sense of sight provides absolutely no answer to that question. And *The Mothman Prophecies* delves into and explores the lack of answers, the sense of uncertainty every human being feels at one point or another. *The Mothman Prophecies* imagines, however, a creature or entity that possesses a very different kind of sight. This entity is a “normal condition of the planet,” according to the film’s ufologist, Alexander Leek (Alan Bates): “They’re just not part of our consensus of what constitutes physical reality.”

Leek goes further in his description, and in one of the movie’s finest scenes, explains the “sight” of the Mothman even more aptly. Leek points to the top floor of a Chicago skyscraper and points out that if a window-washer were up there at that level, he would possess quite a different view, or again, line of sight, then the people walking below, at ground level. He could see a car accident, or a house fire, miles out, whereas Leek and Keel, walking a busy intersection in an urban setting, could not. The Mothman, or Indrid Cold, perhaps, has a similar sense, or distance, from the events occurring on the mortal coil. And, therefore his sense of sight may include an understanding either of the future, or of a disaster. It is this sense of sight that accounts for his capacity to accurately predict plane crashes in Denver or earthquakes in Ecuador. When an exasperated Klein asks why the Mothmen don’t explain themselves to humans, Leek asks why humans don’t explain their motives to cockroaches. The gulf between species is simply too big to bridge, at least in a complete fashion.

To visually suggest this gap between human sight and Indrid Cold’s sight, director Pellington often cuts to the aforementioned “God’s Eye View” of the landscape. A camera (from a perch on a plane or helicopter) gazes straight down at the landscape below, and the feeling is inescapably of being watched by something above; the cosmic equivalent of that window washer on the top floor of a skyscraper.

These shots successfully make mankind look tiny, like cockroaches or ants, and also suggest a huge sense of scope, as if the Mothman’s eyes can take in much more than human eyes do. Even more inventively, Pellington’s film often frames visual compositions in which a symbol that resembles the letter “Y” appears. Sometimes this “Y” symbol is hidden in a landscape, and sometimes it is etched into a tree or burned into a car, but it appears throughout the film many times. Perhaps this icon is the Mothman symbol or code that represents “disaster,” and that wherever this “brand” occurs, tragedy is destined to strike. The Mothman may inscribe locations with it, himself, but of course, humans don’t read his language, or know precisely what it means. Still, The Mothman leaves the “Y” to warn us that disaster is impending.

Consider this visual shorthand or code, this alphabetical representation of catastrophe, the letter “Y.” A “Y” shows one line (at the bottom of symbol) branching into two distinct lines, or a “V” at the top. Fate is going along, and then, at the point of disaster (or right before it) two outcomes become possible, as the V branches to two separate points. In the film, this idea of one line suddenly boasting two branches or outcomes is dramatized in the final moments. John Klein saves Connie from drowning and so the outcome of the bridge disaster—37 deaths—branches off, and there are only 36 deaths, instead. The warning has been understood this time, and heeded. The “Y” may be a sign or hieroglyphic representing disaster, but it may also be a visual representation of the notion that time in certain moments may not be fixed. In instances like this, two fates are momentarily possible. Accordingly, the Mothmen, with their specific and different “sight,”—are able to see this junction, able to detect both realities unfolding at the point right where the bottom of the “Y” form separates into a “V” and one path or another must be selected.

The “Y” symbol appears in one of the very first scenes of *The Mothman Prophecies*, in a driveway that has been shoveled clear of snow, an indication that John and Mary’s life is about to move from fixed time to unfixed time, and that disaster awaits. Of course, neither can see it, as humans can never see what surprise is around the next bend on the road. The “Y” code also recurs in *The Mothman Prophecies* in an MRI scan of a brain tumor, in the arrangement of car headlights in the Ohio River after the bridge collapse, and at other times as well. It’s a remarkable visual representation of the notion that sight and understanding don’t always go hand in hand. The “Y” is present in many times and in many locations, but from a human viewpoint it is not something that registers or seems meaningful. As movie-goers, however, the repetition of the symbol is meaningful, and that’s what counts. *The Mothman Prophecies*

thus explains its theme with an unforgettable visual.

The Mothman Prophecies is intricately about sight in other ways as well. Often during the film, the very image of the film seems to pixelate and go fuzzy, as if it is a faulty transmission the viewer receives from some unknown sender. This particular visualization reinforces the idea of the Mothman's attempts to reach John and others before the occurrence of disaster on the river Ohio. The Mothman is talking to us from another realm, and mere contact itself is difficult to maintain. The pixelated images suggest this difficult contact; that the picture of what is happening to John and the others is not quite clear.

Humans sight can also fool us, and *The Mothman Prophecies* get at this fact in a variety of ways. Gordon claims to have seen John several times, before John arrives in Point Pleasant. Is he actually seeing Indrid Cold, in the guise of John Klein? Similarly, there's a moment late in the film when John is standing in front of his motel room mirror, talking on the phone. The mirror image is on the left; John is on the right. The images in the mirror are minutely out-of-synch with the images on the right, meaning that the reflection is not a reflection at all, but something else. Even John's meeting with Alexander Leek is suspect once the viewer assumes that his or her sense of sight is faulty, and limited. Leek refuses to see John initially, and then relents, mysteriously. But during the actual conversation between Leek and John, John asks if the Mothmen are causing the disasters. Leek's response is "*why would they need to?*" Similarly, when John talks to Indrid Cold on the phone, he asks him if somehow the strange caller is reading his mind. Cold's response is "*why would I need to?*" These responses are virtually identical, and that fact makes one wonder if John ever actually meets with Leek at all, or if he meets with Cold in the guise of Leek, as Gordon apparently met Cold as Klein. The question then becomes: if, by our very nature, our sight is limited and does not allow us "to know" what Indrid Cold knows, is it worth pursuing him, and the Mothman sightings? "*You'll never understand the messages,*" Leek warns Klein. "*You'll misinterpret them.*" And indeed, Klein does just that. Because of the strength of John's feelings for Mary, he feels that if he gives up trying to understand her death and the question of "why her/me," he has betrayed her memory somehow.

In the end, *The Mothman Prophecies* comes directly back to the thought about grieving the dead, and our mortality. At some point, you have to stop asking about the "whys" or imagining that you could have done something differently or stopped fate from unfolding as it did. "*No one can stop it,*" police officer Connie (Laura Linney) tells John. "*Earthquakes are going to happen. Planes are going to crash ... people you love are going to die, and no matter what that voice says, you can't stop it.*" What Connie asks Klein to accept, then is the essential ambiguity and limitations of our human existence. In asking its audience to embrace this difficult truth, and not just reckon with the "reality" of an eight-foot, red-eyed monster, *The Mothman Prophecies* reveals itself as one of the decade's most cerebral and metaphysical explorations.

The truly great horror movies aren't really about monsters, but about the way that mankind responds to monsters. *The Mothman Prophecies* recognizes that the greatest terror in the universe is not some cryptid that may or may not be a hoax, but rather the universal human condition of not having answers about the deepest questions of our existence. After engaging with the Mark Pellington film and its remarkable visualizations, one will feel much like John Klein does in the film, reckoning with the "*Visible dark.*"

What does fate look like?

To quote Indrid Cold, "*it depends on who's look-ing...*"

Octane (a.k.a. Pulse) (DTV) * * ½

Cast & Crew

CAST: Madeleine Stowe (Senga Wilson); Norman Reedus (Recovery Man); Bijou Phillips (Backpacker); Mischa Barton (Nat Wilson); Jonathan Rhys Meyers (The Father); Leo Gregory (Joyrider); Gary Parker

(Vacation Man); Amber Lundy (Vacation Woman); Jenny Jules (Highway Patrol Sgt.); Patrick O'Kane (Trucker); Martin McDougall (Motivational Speaker); Samuel Froler (Marek Wilson); Nigel Whitmey (Detective Stephens); Stephen Lord (Carjacker); Sarah Drews (Christine).

CREW: De Lux Productions, Four Horsemen Films, Random Harvest Pictures and First Look Home Entertainment Present *Octane*. Casting: Leo Davis, Elaine Fallon, John Papsidera, Tani Polentarutti. Production Designer: Max Gottlieb. Costume Designer: Stewart Meachem. Special Effects: Moving Picture Company (MPC), SFX Factory S.A. Music: Simon Boswell, Orbital. Director of Photography: Robin Vidgeon. Film Editor: Trevor Waite. Producers: Alistair MacLean Clark, Basil Stephens. Executive Producers: Bill Allan, Carlo Dusi, Keith Evans, Melvyn Singer. Written by: Stephen Volk. Directed by: Marcus Adams. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A judgmental mother, Senga (Stowe), drives her teenage daughter, Nat (Barton), home from a visit to her father, and the duo bicker about Nat's desired birthday gift, a ticket to an upcoming music festival. Along the trip, they pick up a mysterious, free-spirited hitchhiker (Phillips), who begins to talk with Nat about her lifestyle, and her freedom from parental restrictions. After dropping off the hitchhiker, Senga and Nat stop at a rest stop, and Nat uses this opportunity to run away. She falls in with the hitchhiker's family, which lives on the road, and goes to meet Father (Rhys Meyers), a vampiric cult leader type. Meanwhile, Senga, who fears she is going mad, is aided by a stranger on the road (Reedus) to recover her daughter before she loses Nat forever.

COMMENTARY: *Octane*, also known as *Pulse*, could have been much better than it is. It's a trippy and weird "road trip gone wrong" film that has much to offer, but ultimately doesn't emerge into the coherent, stylish, quasi-vampire film it would like to be. The idea underlying the film is "family," and that, in the words of the film's dialogue, "sometimes family chooses you." This theme comes to light in the journey of fifteen-year-old Nat, who feels hemmed in and controlled by her overbearing mother, Senga, played by Madeleine Stowe. Senga is controlling and refuses to see Nat as the young woman she is becoming. Instead, she wants to litigate everything about her daughter, including the right to go to a music festival. Feeling rebellious, Nat chooses, at least temporarily, a "road family" of maybe-vampires led by a charismatic father figure, a dubbed Jonathan Rhys Meyers, only to learn that in his extended family, there are rivalries, jealousies, and controls as well. The word "vampire" is never actually spoken in the film, and that's probably a good thing, as the vampirism, while related to blood drinking, is also kept at a metaphorical level. The vampires in this film live off the road, and off of wayward travelers, as well as off of human blood.

A second through-line in the film involves Senga and the fact that she pops pills. Much of the film is trippy and inconsistent, and this is tied to her mental state. For example, Senga keeps ending up back at the same rest stop, and keeps seeing the same road travelers, again and again. The scene in which she goes to the police is not very tightly written, but like the other scenes, is suggestive of an altered reality. This is either because Senga has been "on medication since the divorce" from her husband, or because she and her daughter have slipped into the weird, twilight world of the vampires, in which there is a different set of rules. Her husband (on the phone)—who might not really be her husband, but one of the quasi-vampire cult—claims she has been delusional.

Senga's pill popping also seems hypocritical. She is against Nat's attendance at a music festival because she fears that Nat will smoke weed, but here she is, living in her own world of altered reality because of a medication deemed legal and safe by the state, and the medical community. At a diner, Senga and Nat order coffee and Red Bull, two drinks that alter consciousness, in a sense, as well, but are also deemed safe. Now compare these altered states to the vampire frenzy of drinking blood, and one has a sense of what *Octane* may have been going for in its comparison of so-called "normal" families and the monstrous one that seeks prey on the highways.

Adding to the weirdness of the film, it was not shot in America, and so everything seems a bit off, and unusual. Sometimes it is not clear if this affectation is intentional or not, and what one moment

seems fascinating at another moment seems absolutely off, and poorly rendered. For instance, there are many signs or signals of religious belief on the highways pictured here, including a bumper sticker “*God Bless America*” and a billboard about Satan being unloosed from his prison. These touches may be an attempt to make the production feel authentically American, or they may be adding another element to the “altered states” argument, since religious fervor, it might be added, as an altered state all its own, especially in the 2000s, the era of the 9/11 attacks and America’s “crusade” for revenge over them.

Finally, *Octane* ends simplistically, with almost literally no explanation for any of the events, as Senga re-asserts her familiar ties and rescues Nat from the cult. “*I am your mother*,” she declares, and that line suggests another paean to motherhood (see *Forgotten*) but hardly addresses the issues of hypocrisy and family raised by the film. It is learned, at one point, for example that Senga wanted an abortion before Nat was born, and this information, too, is to make her seem like a hypocrite, at least to some. How can she reject motherhood and claim motherhood? The answer is easy, of course, people change over time. Perhaps the message is that family is inherently imperfect and flawed, but a biological connection is still superior to a vampiric one, one based on blood lust, thievery, and unholy desires.

Half the time, viewers don’t really know what is happening in *Octane*, or even what the film’s reality is, anymore. Again, the mood is not carefully sustained or maintained, with the result being that suspension of disbelief is sometimes hard to come by, and the film feels disjointed, instead of trippy. In the moments when *Octane* achieves a trance-like, bizarre feeling of “highway hypnosis”—as if you are driving your car on a lonely highway in the middle of the night and can’t be sure you haven’t nodded off—it works well enough. The rest of the time the movie labors hard to be meaningful and deep but doesn’t quite make the cut.

A Tale of Two Sisters * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kap-su Kim (Moo-hyeon Bae); Jung-ah Yum (Eun-joo Heo); Soo-jing Lim (Soo-mi Bae); Geun-young Moon (Soo-yeoh Bae); Dae Yeon Lee (Su-mi’s Doctor); Seung-bi Lee (Mi-hee).

CREW: Costume Design: Soo-Kyung Ok. Music: Byung-woo Lee. Director of Photography: Mo-gae Lee. Film Editors: Im-Pyo Ko, Hyeon-mi Lee. Visual Effects: Wook Kim. Producer: Jeong-wan Oh, Ki-min h. Executive Producers: Jae-Won Choi, Jung-Wan Oh. Written and Directed by: Kim Jee-woon. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 114 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young woman, Soo-mi (Lim), returns home from a mental institution, to live with her father (Bae) and evil stepmother, Eun-joo (Yum). She and her sister, Soon-yeo (Moon) hold Eun-joo responsible for the death of their mother. Soo-mi is haunted by sinister spirits at the house, but all is not as it seems.

COMMENTARY: Based on a local fairy tale, *A Tale of Two Sisters* was a surprise hit at the Korean box office, and a film that met with widespread appreciation over the globe. So much so, in fact, that the film was remade in America in 2009 as *The Uninvited*. A lugubrious, despairing, even bleak horror film, *A Tale of Two Sisters* concerns mental illness, perhaps, as much as it does the supernatural. Perhaps that description isn’t entirely apt, however, because the movie positions all its horror in the home, in the hearth. Family is at the heart of the film, as well as the terrible things, such as mental illness, that families endure.

Soo-mi, the film’s protagonist suffers in the film from a dissociative disorder, which involves lapses in perception and identity. Those who suffer from this disorder use those lapses or breakdowns as a kind of shield, a defense mechanism so they don’t have to deal with something else, some pain, perhaps, in

their lives. This use of that breakdown is not voluntary, it is not a trick, it is not a deception. In *A Tale of Two Sisters*, Soo-mi “sees” her sister, Soon-yeoh, who it turns out, has actually died. She has repressed or suppressed that reality and has recreated her younger sister in an attempt, perhaps, to assuage her guilt for the role she played in her death. She also hallucinated a version of Eun-joo, the “evil” stepmother that is not exactly real; but not exactly wrong, either. The statement made, early on, that “*there is something in this house*,” seems accurate, whether it is in terms of Soo-mi’s delusions/creations, or the presence of a spirit who has legitimately been wronged, and who, it seems, truly exists, at least after a fashion.

Much of the evil in the film, whether generated by mental illness or by supernatural mechanism, seems to have a fulcrum in a bedroom wardrobe. A wardrobe is a chest of sorts, utilized for storing apparel. The wardrobe in the film seems to be the warehouse for the secrets, lies, and terrors of the family, a place of both trauma and guilt, and sin too. The film creates a mood of slow-burn terror, and an atmosphere of oppression as the viewer is engaged to ferret out the truth of this house and untangle the pathology (and mythology) from the facts.

Filed with Hitchcockian precision, *A Tale of Two Sisters* possesses moments of breath-taking terror, but ultimately resolves not as a ghost story, but as an immensely sad story about the collapse and destruction of a family. There is a heaviness about the film that isn’t easily shaken after watching. Sin, guilt, sadness, these things can follow people “*around like a ghost*,” to quote the step-mother in a film, so *A Tale of Two Sisters* is about all kinds of apparitions; ones that haunt our waking lives, haunt our nightmares, and perhaps most trenchantly, haunt our relationships with the ones we love. Through all the events in the film, the father comes across as absent and unengaged. He refuses to believe anything bad about Eun-joo, and his empty, disengagement is juxtaposed with photographs in the house of him and his first wife in younger days. So, it is the past, too, haunting the present, it might be fair to state.

The 2009 remake is shorter by about a half-hour, and lingers not on deep emotions, and the concept of haunting. It doesn’t truly focus on mental illness, either. This 2003 original is a one-of-a-kind film, made with a surprising sensitivity and humanity, and it doesn’t translate particularly well to Hollywood conventions. In a tale of two movies, *A Tale of Two Sisters* is the deep, nightmarish version of the material, and the iteration of this story that still garners acclaim, and recognition. It doesn’t move fast. It requires patience. But it is a film that rewards those who invest. I have written many times in this book that the American remakes of J or Asian horrors work better, for this American writer. The context shift to an American points-of-view makes those remakes identifiable and powerful to, well, Americans. In the case of *A Tale of Two Sisters*, however, perhaps the vicissitudes of family are universal, and so this film feels deep and whole and true, while the remake feels shallow and unconvinced, even, of what it is really about, by comparison.

Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines * * *

Critical Reception

“...this is a virtual re-run of T-2, with the exceptions that Kristanna Loken makes a much more shapely morphing terminatrix than Robert Patrick (apparently humans are less suspicious of female robot assassins) and Schwarzenegger is the only major cast member to return. Without creator/director James Cameron at the helm, it’s more lightweight than fans would expect.”—Patrick McDonald, *The Advertiser*, December 3, 2003.

“For all the hype and the inevitable box office bonanza, *Terminator 3* is essentially a B movie, content to be loud, dumb and obvious, and to leave the Great Ideas to bona fide public intellectuals like Keanu Reeves and the Hulk. Schwarzenegger acts with his usual leaden whimsy, manifesting the gift for uttering hard-to-forget, meaningless catchphrases that is most likely the wellspring of his blossoming reported desire to seek elective office in California.”—A.O. Scott, *The New York Times*, July 11, 2003.

“*Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* is a very solid film that unfortunately follows a classic and a masterpiece

(T2 is up there in the best sequels of all time). Arnold Schwarzenegger continues his run as everyone's favorite cybernetic organism (little did he know he wasn't even at the halfway point yet!). There's lots of action, some attempts at tugging on our heartstrings (probably less successful than the action), and an ending that seemed surprising (if bleak) at the time and promised to launch the series in a whole new direction (and bring us closer to the future we really wanted to explore). Ahem, be careful what you wish for.

The series had established its own particular tropes by this point, and a certain fatigue was slipping into the framework. One imagines some giant planning board on a wall in the future where Skynet plans out some new Terminator mission, which the Resistance must then counter, and by six movies or so, the plans must be overlapping and causing unintended consequences enough to make Ant-Man's head spin. Director Jonathan Mostow does as good a job as anyone might have with this film—but at the end of the day, this entire series feels like a series of remakes more than a linear, coherent storyline. We've seen nearly all of this before, and having a female terminator is something that you could almost predict when the first film came out as something that would likely happen if the series were to continue. Not to criticize Kristanna Loken—she did fine with what she was given—but Robert Patrick in *T2*—there was menace there due to his performance, not just his appearance—Arnold can't be the only Terminator with a personality, and unfortunately, in this film, he is exactly that.

This film was the beginning of a long, slow descent into formula—it's better than most of the other sequels, which is damning praise if ever there was damning praise.”—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Terminator); Nick Stahl (John Connor); Claire Danes (Kate Brewster); Kristanna Loken (T-X); David Andrews (Robert Brewster); Mark Famiglietti (Scott Peterson); Earl Boen (Dr. Peter Silberman); Moira Harris (Betsy); Chopper Bernet (Chief Engineer); Chris Lawford (Brewster's Ade); Carolyn Hennessy (Rich Woman); Jay Avocone (Cop); M.C. Gainey (Roadhouse Bouncer).

CREW: Warner Bros., C-2 Pictures, Intermedia Films, IMF, Mostow/Leiberman Productions present *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*. Casting: Sara Halley Finn, Randi Hiller. Production Designer: Jeff Mann. Costume Designer: April Ferry. Special Effects: Riot, New Deal Studios, Sandbox FX, Beau LLC, Anatomorphex, CIS Hollywood, Digic Pictures, Sigiscope, Gentle Giant Studios, Giant Killer Robots, Hydraulx, ILM, Stan Winston Studio, Useful Company. Music: Marco Beltrami. Director of Photography: Don Burgess. Film Editors: Nicolas de Toth, Neil Travis. Producer: Matthias Deyle, Mario F. Kassar, Hal Liberman, Joel B. Michaels, Andrew G. Vajna, Colin Wilson. Executive Producers: Moritz Borman, Guy East, Gale Ann Hurd, Aslan Nadery, Dieter Nobbe, Volker Schauz, Nigel Sinclair. Characters created by: James Cameron and Gale Anne Hurd. Story by: Michael Ferris, John Brancato, Ted Sarafian. Written by: John Brancato, Michael Ferris. Directed by: Jonathan Mostow. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 109 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: It has been years since John Connor, his Terminator protector and Sarah Connor prevented the 1997 onset of Judgment Day. Since then, Sarah has died of cancer, and John (Nick Stahl) has lived off the grid as a nomad. He lurks in the shadows, and fears that the future is, as yet, “unwritten.” And then, one day in 2003, the war against the machines unexpectedly resumes. Skynet sends back in time a T-X or Terminatrix (Lokken) to kill Connor's top lieutenants, including his future-wife, Kate Brewster (Danes). A T-850 Terminator (Schwarzenegger) has also traveled back in time to stop her. But his mission this time is not to obey Connor's orders, but Kate's. A confused Kate plays catch-up, even as Connor tells her about the birth of Skynet and the future war with Terminators. Unfortunately, the T-850 has more bad news. The military—and Kate's father—will activate Skynet today, in response to a virus scuttling the Internet and online communications. Connor, Kate and the T-850 attempt to stop Judgment Day, seeking to destroy the Skynet mainframe. But it won't be easy.

COMMENTARY: Although *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003) from director Jonathan Mostow is not widely considered as successful a film as either of its Cameron-helmed *Terminator* predecessors, its reputation has improved somewhat in the last few years, perhaps owing to the lousy quality of its follow-ups, *Terminator Salvation* (2009), and *Terminator: Genisys* (2015), or perhaps because its own

virtues have become more evident with the passage of time.

And yes, the movie possesses virtues.



He'll be back. Arnold Schwarzenegger returns as a T-101 Terminator in *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003). Here, the cyborg has taken some heavy damage.

Mostow—a talent who directed a strong horror film of the 1990s, *Breakdown* (1997)—stages several delirious action scenes in *T3*, particularly one incredible demolition-derby involving a truck and several police cars. But more importantly, perhaps, *Terminator 3* plays cannily against our ingrained belief as experienced movie viewers that big-budget Hollywood movie franchises tend towards—if not entropy—then status quo. Audiences go into this third movie with the (cynical?) belief that no meaningful change will occur in the chronology. Terminators will come. Terminators will fall. Humanity will survive. Judgment Day will be prevented.

Of course, such an assumption proves absolutely wrong here, but in a sense, viewers are “tricked” into believing it, along with lead characters John Connor (Nick Stahl) and Kate Brewster (Claire Danes), right up until the very last minutes of the film. Thus, the movie’s ending comes up as a genuine surprise, even though it should be perfectly predictable. Accordingly, *T3* boasts the courage of its convictions, and functions not as merely as another “*terminators stalking in the past*” story, but as a turning point for the entire franchise. This approach grants the film a level of artistic integrity that one doesn’t always find in a second sequel, and which deserves some praise.



Kristanna Loken, kitted up with mechanical arm, is the deadly T-X in *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003).

And what an ending the movie depicts! *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* ends in a blaze of glory as Judgment Day arrives and nothing can be done to stop it. The twilight of human dominance over the Earth is, paradoxically, beautiful, and lyrically visualized. Uniquely, this denouement also offers the movie series a new thematic approach to understanding “fate,” which has proven one of the key elements of the franchise. If previous entries lived by the motto “no fate but what you make,” *Terminator 3* makes one consider the not entirely pleasant idea that some destinies are simply meant to be and cannot be changed. You may be able to delay or forestall those destinies, but what was meant to be, will be.

Also, on the positive side of the ledger, Kristanna Loken is highly effective as the T-X, an upgraded Terminator model who can over-power and co-opt other machines, transforming them into allies. This Terminatrix can also sample DNA through “taste” and even inflate her cleavage so as to distract leering male police officers. Never in the film does one feel that Loken is outmatched by Schwarzenegger’s intimidating physical presence, or that he is destined to emerge triumphant from their physical confrontations. Contrarily, Loken—like the lithe, youthful Patrick before her—proves that physical size isn’t a necessity when crafting a sense of menace.

If *T3* disappoints in any specific regard, it involves the second act, which doesn’t live up to the promise of the first or the surprises of the third. Although it is nice to see Dr. Silberman (Earl Boen) again, the interlude at a cemetery—with police and a shoot-out—feels like a bit of a time-waster given everything else happening in the story, including the activation of Skynet, the discovery of Kate Brewster’s importance in the scheme of things, and the countdown to Judgment Day. Also, the absence of Sarah Connor in this story doesn’t quite feel right, though it is clear that Brewster—who reminds John of his mother—is being groomed as the next tough female role model in the series.

So, *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* is not another Cameron-level entry. Yet for what it is, a solid film with a brilliant ending, it is pretty damned good. *T3*’s final moments are haunting, beautiful, and surprising, and carry the film over the finish line with a degree of shock and awe. The apocalypse at the end of the film juices the climax, and the franchise itself, and should have provided a grand opening for the most courageous, most inventive *Terminator* yet made.

Of course, that didn’t happen

Yet *Rise of the Machines* ends in a way that precludes further stories in this paradigm, and in the process veritably demands that the *Terminator* films not stagnate, but move forward, both chronologically and creatively. It deserves some credit for this twist in the formula, even if the follow-up film, *Salvation*, squandered the opportunity it provided.

Then, *Genisys* and *Dark Fate* (2019) did the same thing.

Terminator 3 reaches its dramatic apex in its final moments. Connor and Brewster learn that there is no Skynet mainframe to blow-up, and therefore no way to avert nuclear Armageddon. They must then stand-by as the ICBMs launch, and a new world order is forged out of fire. This shocking conclusion is visualized in gorgeous terms. The camera captures wide-open, mid-western American skies, farm silos and then the contrails of ICBMs as they launch and crisscross the blue sky. Then they move higher, into orbit, and the contrails blossom into terrifying nuclear mushrooms. It is weird and counter-intuitive to suggest that humanity’s destruction could be beautiful, but *Terminator 3*’s final moments are shocking and weirdly elegiac. In the last moment before the end, the movie pauses to see how beautiful, how fragile the world really is. Before all is lost, the viewer sees why the world, in John Connor’s words, is such a “gift,” every single day.

It is appropriate and timely, too that the first *Terminator* film after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 should end not with disaster averted, but with disaster realized. The terrorist attacks were not averted, either. This decade is nothing if not sanguine about the possibility of something terrible, whether a war or a hurricane, or an economic collapse, occurring. The one and only *Terminator* Film, historically adjacent to 9/11, is also the only one in the six-film franchise to depict Judgment Day not as a fantasy, or something unseen that happened in the past, but a cold, hard fact. But, also in this ending, in this turning point, one must note something else: the fulfillment of destiny. Since before John Connor was born, he was destined to be the great leader who frees the human race from the yoke of the oppressive

machines, from Skynet. Together, he, Sarah, and the T-800 believe they have averted that destiny, but the John Connor we meet at *T-3's* beginning is not exactly thriving. He lives off the grid with “no phone, no address,” having “erased” all connections to society and other people. It's not that John wants the world to end, he doesn't. But when it does happen, in the film's denouement, he—like the mushroom clouds—can at long last blossom; can become what he was meant to be all along. A hero. No one wants war, no one wants destruction, but there is a difference between trying to escape destiny and facing it with courage, and that seems to be the line the film walks vis-à-vis John. He is finally put into a position where he cannot deny what is coming and must accept it. “*There was never any stopping it,*” he recognizes, at long last.

John's journey should be a parallel track with the *Terminator* franchise. It should no longer keep telling the same stories of traveling back in time and fighting the war with the machines in the past (our present). Like John, the franchise accepts its destiny in this third film, and that is, finally, to tell the rest of John's story, to show him as the great leader we have heard so much about in the first three films. It's a shame the franchise instead retreats to cowardice after *Salvation* and keeps telling the same pre-apocalypse story over and over again.

One may notice that *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* is book-ended by nuclear mushroom clouds, one at the beginning of the film (in John's imagination) and one at the end, in real life. Between these two flowers of destruction, John learns to accept his destiny, and no longer tries to change it, or wriggle his way out of it. Again, this is a significant change for the saga, a repudiation of the long-standing franchise aesthetic that fate is elastic, and our actions can change it. *Terminator 3* provides a shift in thinking that, again, by all rights, should push the franchise forward. It suggests that the saga will not be one in which we can keep setting back or destroying Judgment Day. The inevitable shall happen, and here it does.

Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines also has some other notable ideas and themes that render it worth a second or third watch. Linda Hamilton's Sarah Connor is one of the greatest of all female action-heroines in film history (second only perhaps to Sigourney Weaver's Ripley). Although Connor is not present in the film, *Rise of the Machines* at the very least seems mindful of its legacy and responsibility to depict female characters in that kind of light. Though Sarah is (sadly) absent, *T3* introduces viewers to the other woman behind this great man, John's wife, Kate. And it also creates a female menace in the T-X that can rival Arnold in terms of raw power and screen presence. So those viewers who complain about a Sarah-less entry have a point in one sense, but are missing, in another sense, the film's achievements in a similar regard. Female characters are not given short shrift here.

Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines moves at a fast, violent clip, and Arnold Schwarzenegger instantly conveys his remarkable magnetism and humor in the role that, more than any other, made him a global star. Arnold may not be a great actor, but he is a great screen presence, and he invites viewers into the world with his trademark humor and self-awareness. By playing an (emotionally dumb) machine, Schwarzenegger is able to unexpectedly plum scenes for laughs, pathos, and even humanity. Basically, Schwarzenegger can do no wrong in this familiar role, and he brings his best game to the film. When one couples the presence of Schwarzenegger with the third film's new, well-expressed philosophy about fate, and the unforgettable ending, there are more than enough ingredients to declare the film an artistic success.

It would have been wonderful if those to whom Mostow passed the *Terminator* baton for the fourth film, had demonstrated the same level of ingenuity and creative integrity as he did in *Rise of the Machines*. To misquote John Connor in *T3*, the first three *Terminator* films are a “gift” we should enjoy every day, especially considering what comes after them.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Naturally, we're now facing the business end of an overproduced, video-director remake, slick and grue-marinated and loud as a sonic boom. Its release dotting the debris trail of another unpopular, Texan-initiated war, Marcus Nispel's first film is adept and nasty enough to suggest a metaphoric agenda—after all, Texas is the dark heart of Bush Country, a self-expanding territory where business eats the young, death rows teem with the helpless, and Christ-righteous gun law rules from Waco to Tikrit."—Michael Atkinson, *The Village Voice*, October 22, 2003.

"The remake both adds new elements and leaves out some classic moments from the original. In terms of plot and structure, aside from the framing story, the remake changes the hitchhiker to a distraught teen mother (Lauren German) who commits suicide because, as we later learn, she had her baby girl stolen from her by the 'crazy family.' Her suicide then becomes the plot device which causes the characters to make their fatal detour.... On the missing side, there is no classic dinner scene—possibly because the script could not accommodate the heroine Erin being subjected to such extended torture (or perhaps Biel herself would not consent to it?). While the art direction remains good in the remake, and borrows from the original, the bones n' feather aesthetic is restricted mainly to Leatherface's basement butcher shop, and there is no equivalent to the harrowing scene where the distraught, terrified Pam (Teri McMinn) falls into the horrible house's living room and is aggressively 'attacked' by Hooper's direction (extreme close-ups, frantic cuts, zoom shots, suffocating mise en scène, grating sound effects). Another important difference is that the remake is entirely stripped of the original's social satire on rampant consumerism (reflected in the act of cannibalism) and the economic effects of industrialization, and consequently has none of the original's black humor and nuanced switches in tone."—Donato Totaro, *Offscreen*, "Texas Chainsaw Massacre Redux," November 2003.

"They'll never learn. As the 2000s sought to remake every modern horror classic, here we get the inevitable *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake—directed by Marcus Nispel, who allegedly thought it was sacrilege to make this film and then did it anyway. Daniel Pearl's cinematography, the original cinematographer from Tobe Hooper's original, performed the same duties here and offers a less gritty, more refined look to the remake. Kudos to him. R. Lee Ermey can't give a bad performance, and his updating (if you can really call it that) of Jim Siedow's 'Cook' (a.k.a. Drayton Sawyer), was my favorite performance in the film, but that was probably just Ermey being Ermey. And Leatherface being played by Christopher Walken's son from *Batman Returns*—that's just tough to get past.

This film is just mean in its soul. The original was no picnic (pardon the pun, perhaps), but there was an organic nature to the family's depraved way of serving dinner—one often wonders if they needed to demean their victims as a way to make things a little more palatable. In this update, the characters are mean for the sake of meanness, and the plot machinations involving a hitchhiker, a skin disease for Leatherface, and enough images that call back to the original are similar enough that I guess you can call this a remake.

Tobe Hooper's original film was simple, almost primitive. The remake needs to account for a few decades of horror films that have picked the bones of Hooper's film and the end result is something that is perhaps too polished for its own good—it fails because it tried to be sophisticated, which is like bringing a napkin to a chainsaw fight—yeah, napkins will be needed, but it can't really match what it's up against."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

"This one doesn't get the love I think it deserves. MetaCritic gives it a 38% rating? Director Marcus Nispel paints a gruesome nihilistic world where the kids are truly doomed. He captures the mood of a Grimm's Fairy Tale. The actors, though WB alums like all the *Scream* retreads of the late 90s, invested in their characters so the audience cares about their plight. Casting R. Lee Ermey as a foaming-at-the-mouth sheriff was inspired."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jonathan Tucker (Morgan); Erica Leerhsen (Pepper); Mike Vogel (Andy); Eric Balfour (Kemper); Andrew Bryniarski (Thomas Hewitt/Leatherface); R. Lee Ermey (Sheriff Hoyt); David Dorfman (Jedidiah);

Lauren German (Teenage Girl); Terrence Evans (Old Monty); Marietta Marich (Luda May); Heather Kafka (Henrietta); Kathy Lamkin (Tea Lady); Brad Leland (Big Rig Bob); Mamie Meek (Clerk); John Larroquette (Narrator).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Focus Features, Platinum Dunes and Next Entertainment present in association with Radar Pictures and Chainsaw Production LLC, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Casting: Lisa Fields. Costume Designer: Bobbie Mannix. Production Designer: Greg Blair. Special Effects: Asylum VFX. Music: Steve Jablonsky. Director of Photography: Daniel C. Pearl. Film Editor: Glen Scantlebury. Producer: Mike Fleiss. Executive Producers: Jeffrey Allard, Ted Field, Andrew Form, Brad Fuller, Guy Stodel. Based on the 1974 screenplay by: Kim Henkel and Tobe Hooper. Written by: Scott Kosar. Directed by: Marcus Nispel. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On August 18, 1973, a group of young adults—Erin (Biel), Kemper (Balfour), Andy (Vogel), Pepper (Leerhsen) and Morgan (Tucker)—return from Mexico and head to Dallas, traversing Travis County, Texas, in the process. There the youngsters encounter a female hitchhiker (German), who commits suicide. When they attempt to get her body to the police, however, they encounter a brutal, sadistic local sheriff (Ermev) and his twisted family. Among the denizens of that family is Leatherface (Bryniarski), a chainsaw wielding, human-face-wearing victim of a degenerative skin condition. Erin (Biel) attempts to survive the gauntlet of terrors overseen by the sheriff and Leatherface, even as her friends are brutally dismembered and killed.

COMMENTARY: Right around Halloween of 2018, this author had the pleasure of presenting Tobe Hooper's original masterpiece, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, to a film club at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina. Most of the one-hundred or so students gathered there for the evening had never seen the movie before. They only knew the film by its fearsome title, and its perhaps misleading reputation as a "gory" movie. One of the most significant things I told the audience that night, I believe, is that the students had permission to laugh. I informed they would find the film harrowing, scary, and yes, at times, quite funny. This permission to laugh seemed to open up an enjoyment of the film, and the students came away from the film energized and engaged. They enjoyed Hooper's masterwork with nervous bouts of laughter, recognizing it as a surreal masterpiece, and came away with an understanding that Hooper is not a mainstream filmmaker, even in terms of horror

No one is going to make the mistake of laughing in Marcus Nispel's remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

The film boasts almost no sense of humor whatsoever, a common flaw of the "post-irony," post-9/11 horror films of the early 21st century.

And yet—please hear me out—that's okay too. The first *Texas Chainsaw* is a one-of-a-kind horror film that stems from the unruly imagination of Hooper and Kim Henkel and plays on the social turbulence of the early 1970s, an era of oil embargoes, energy crises, and a corrupt president. The 1970s film leaves itself open, or perhaps, opens itself up to multiple interpretations. It's a wake-up from the hippie dream. It's a commentary on economics and regional differences in America. It's an anthem for vegans. If you love horror, and you love Hooper's films, you already know all the talking-points, all the reasons to admire *Chainsaw* as one of the most significant movie titles in the first hundred years of world cinema.

So, Hooper's film exists, and nothing can take away from its genius, or one-of-a-kind nervous energy.

The remake is a completely different animal, and as my commentary on remakes throughout this book makes plain, I hope, that is the only terrain on which it could possibly hope to succeed. Slavishly restaging the original film, with the same ideas underlining it would have resulted in a film that no one could possibly love. Accordingly, this version of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* does not involve the cannibalism/vegan metaphor. It is not about, in any significant way, running out of gas in America. And the family dynamics—Cook, Grandpa and the Hitchhiker—have been re-arranged in a totally new way.



Erin (Jessica Biel) takes a wrong turn into terror in the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003).

These may be controverial choices, but again, one can see that they are good ones. I was going to write "correct" ones, but that's a subjective assessment, perhaps. For the most part the 2003 *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* spares us the agony of seeing new, unfamiliar actors recreate performances that were, frankly, unforgettable, and one of a kind. Instead, the remake invents a new world for Leatherface, with new individuals, and that aspect is one reason why the film succeeds. The best and smartest decision the re-makers forged here was to not only give Leatherface a new family but to explore something that Hooper's original film chose not to detail: the ecosystem *around* the monstrous family.

Here, the traveling teens are entrapped not just in a house of the mad, or at a Mad Hatter's tea party for the deranged, but in a whole town that enables their madness. The local sheriff, an avatar not of useless authority, but rather corrupt authority, is part of that ecosystem. The old women in the trailer home who steal the children of waylaid travelers and poison Erin's tea are part of that same ecosystem. The barbecue stand and last chance gas station—even if they don't necessarily serve human body parts—are part of that ecosystem. The waifish, half-savage child who skulks in the periphery of the frames is part of that ecosystem too.

If Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is about a mad family in a mad farmhouse, Marcus Nispel's remake is about the world around that madness; the world that enables that madness. This is a close-knit, incestuous world, where Leatherface is not a monster, but a "good boy" who is treated poorly by outsiders through no fault of his own, because of his skin disease. This is a world where the evil, brutish sheriff also makes certain that a child-less locale gets to raise a child (from a dead traveler's family), supporting her needs and desires in an admittedly twisted way. This *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* suggests a community of "*family values*" that are twisted, but recognizable in a way that is comparable, and yet different from the values embraced by Cook and the others in the original.

The film's narrative has been updated of course, and this classic "road trip terror" film has been reconsidered in light of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Again, those attacks are about terrorists, it's true, but mainly they are about a terrible twist of fate. Americans went to work on the morning of September 11, believing they lived in one world (of peace, prosperity, and advanced technology) only to discover that they lived in another one entirely, a world of life and death choices; of death by burning, or death by jumping from a skyscraper window. Families said goodbye to their loved ones in the morning, unthinkingly, only to realize by noon that they would never see them again. *Chainsaw's* road trip format perfectly embodies this paradigm because it is all about a normal day suddenly turned horrific. An unseen fate has awaited all along, in the form of a hitchhiker, a wrong turn, or a cabal of murderous cannibals.

The new *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* embodies this approach. Even though it is set in the 1970s, it is a perfect reflection of the post-9/11 road trip terror paradigm. Here, the young adult characters are all busily making plans about their future, like they have the deciding vote in their fate, they destiny. They are returning to America from Mexico, transporting weed across the border, which they intend to sell.

They will never get to sell it.

Kemper proposes to Erin, but he never gets the chance to marry her.

Man proposes, and God disposes.

After picking up the hitchhiker, their fates are sealed, and the film's dialogue suggests this. "*It's like synchronicity*," suggests Pepper, "*like this shit is not happening*." The young hitchhiker, soon to be dead, likewise offers a simple but trenchant warning. "*You're going the wrong way*," she reveals, before blowing her brains out.

There is all kinds of horror in this film, but—in much the same fashion as 2003's *Wrong Turn*—one of the most powerful horrors in this film is the protagonists being forced to reckon with the notion that their life is not what they believed it to be. They have crossed over into a new life. "*Why did she do it? Why did she have to pick us?*" Pepper asks. She realizes that a threshold has been crossed, and that the reality of her life before meeting the hitchhiker—the reality of days at the lake, tire swings, and tunes like "*Sweet Home Alabama*"—has been replaced by a mad reality where death and degradation are around every corner. Again, not to be put too fine a point on it, it's the difference, in 2003, between a pre-9/11 mindset and a post-9/11 mindset. Americans believed they lived in one world: the world of

cell phones, the Internet, Starbucks and peace and prosperity, but found out they lived in another, far more dangerous one.

After the hitchhiker kills herself, a character notes “*I’ve never seen anyone die before*,” and that observation fits the milieu too. After 9/11, Americans saw photographs and videos of their fellow citizens plummeting to their deaths from skyscraper windows. A new reality, or at least an unacknowledged one, had replaced a more innocent one.

In this film, Leatherface is also, very clearly, a stand-in for the boogeyman of the decade, Al-Qaeda mastermind Osama Bin Laden. Bin Laden was a well-known commodity in geo-politics (particularly in Afghanistan) for at least two decades before the 9/11 terrorist attacks on America. In fact, he had been an ally in the 1980s in the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. He then emerged to attack us on 9/11 before disappearing, not to be seen again. He would only re-appear, periodically, in tapes (predictably, before the 2004 election) to again terrorize the American populace.

In this remake, Leatherface is very much the same type of character. He is well known by the “authority” of the local Texas town (namely Sheriff Hoyt), and he launches the brutal attack on all strangers in the town (as we see from the abandoned cars on the Hewitt property). Then, he disappears. The film’s framing device is a black-and-white found-footage, self-contained tale of its own. In it, police explore the crime scene, and the monster re-appears, attacking suddenly, before vanishing onto the horizon.

The warning is clear. The Boogeyman may not be here, but he is not gone. He will return to terrorize us once more, when we least expect it.

Like Manhattan, or Ground Zero after the towers fell, the Hewitt home is described as a massive crime scene, where “*1300 pieces of evidence*” are gathered by police. And, of course, that evidence “*collected dust*” as Leatherface disappeared, and as Osama Bin Laden disappeared into the mountains of Tora Bora. The Boogeyman—Osama Bin Laden or Leatherface—is terrifying precisely because we can’t kill him, and we don’t know when he will return to again terrorize us. Fortunately, President Obama ordered the strike that killed Bin Laden in 2011, and America could finally rest easy, after that day, that at least one Boogeyman of the War on Terror had been dealt with, permanently. This film provides no such closure about Leatherface.

This *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* also seems to reckon with the movement that was brewing after the 9/11 attacks: the criticism of the Bush Administration for its over-the-top response. Bush’s presidency dispensed, for example, with the idea that wars should not be fought for pre-emptive reasons and reserved the right to see dangers across the world and handle them before they could metastasize into another 9/11. The Administration ginned up evidence against Iraq, claiming without real proof that Saddam was hiding weapons of mass destruction and reconstituting his nuclear program. In the film, a bumper sticker which reads “*Nothing is True. Everything is permitted*” is seen prominently in the frame. It’s a signpost for understanding this remake.

Soon after 9/11, “Truthers” were questioning the details of the 9/11 attacks and wondering if this “new Pearl Harbor” had been arranged, at the cost of American blood, to further the ideal of American Empire in the Middle East. This author resists such conspiracies, but the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is a paranoid film. Hoyt is not a real sheriff, or at least not one dedicated to law enforcement. The town, or ecosystem around Leatherface, protects him, and lest we forget, many Americans believed that Bush was protecting Bin Laden, especially after the U.S. government secretly flew members of the Bin Laden family from America just days after the 9/11 attacks (CBS News. September 30, 2001, “Bin Laden Family Evacuated.”)

In short, this *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is not about a sick and corrupt family that runs a barbecue and kills travelers, it’s about a corrupt eco-system, including government/law enforcement, that commits terrible crimes (murder, dismemberment, child abduction) and then protects, through its legal authority those responsible for the crimes.

Another way to phrase this: The original film was about innocent kids running upon a family of psychos. The remake is about innocent kids running upon a town of psychos, who control not only their lives and deaths, but the lives and deaths of everybody in the region. Reality is not what it seems

(*nothing is true*); crimes are enthusiastically engaged in (*everything is permitted*). Again, from a certain point of view, this was America in the post-9/11 era. The 9/11 attacks were an inside job (*nothing is true*), and pre-emptive attack and occupation of sovereign lands is now on the table (*everything is permitted*). Again, this author isn't saying he believes that, only that the film is a near perfect metaphor for this particular belief system.

Going back to the remake problem or syndrome, this author's conclusion is that the only remakes that succeed, or can succeed, are the ones that update their stories and characters to modern or contemporary concerns. Humorless and cynical as it is, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* fulfills this credential. It re-imagines the out-of-gas, Nixon Age original imaginatively for the War on Terror/Bush Administration era it reflects. In doing so, the remake speaks as powerfully to the 21st century, perhaps, as the off-beat, surreal, one-of-a-kind original did to the early 1970s. It's just not as easy to see the remake's virtues because the remake is indeed, slick and somewhat mainstream. This film is populated by WB stars, features state of the art special effects, and moves in a way that feels, perhaps, more conventional than the original film's off-kilter rhythm. It is true that the remake doesn't spark any nervous laughter. But no one was laughing in the post-9/11, "irony" is dead milieu anyway, and the remake provokes instead an oppressive sense that the fix is in, and that there is no escape for anyone.

There is no safe harbor to escape to. Nothing that we believe is true, and everything is permissible.

This is one remake that doesn't fool around, doesn't try to be "meta," and which doubles down on the horror and terror. Fans can trumpet it and champion it on that front. What the original film is often accused of being (excessively gory) this remake takes as a *fait accompli*, since again, everything is permissible.

To be blunt: this may not be the best or most artistic version of the *Chainsaw* mythos, but in some sense, it is actually the darkest entry in the franchise (which is truly an accomplishment). Horror isn't a place, here, that you find when your run out of gas. Rather, it's the corrupt world all around you, every day. It's the entire ecosystem that is corrupt. For here, the boogeyman is forever "out there," and our fate isn't in our hands.

We're going the wrong way.

Underworld * * ½

Critical Reception

"For all its poor pacing and chopped up editing, *Underworld* does have something on its mind besides matching up its throbbing rock soundtrack to slow-motioned action sequences. While the film occasionally allows the race differences to lapse into feline-canine behavioral differences (or worse, sets up a heavy-handed *Romeo and Juliet* plot), the political premise—the artifice of race—is intriguing, as the coming together of these races—through miscegenation—is posited as a most terrifying and revolutionary act, thoroughly alarming the Elders who, in their infinite wisdom, regularly turn humans into faux versions of themselves, properly propagandized hench-people to perpetuate the hate and do the hard work." Cynthia Fuchs, *Popmatters*, September 17, 2003.

"So, a good premise and an absolutely fabulous outfit are wasted in this exercise in gothic overload. If you seek a good vampire film with a modern twist, rent *Near Dark*. If you need a gothic fix, bust out your Cure discs and read Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. If you crave being bored to the point of delirium, *Underworld* should do the trick."—Bob Grimm, *Reno News and Review*: "Gothic Hell," September 23, 2003.

"*Underworld* is a derivative and dramatically weak mess without so much as a design element that wasn't lifted from something better. The elephant in the room is, of course, the film's vampire-versus-werewolf back story. It is eerily similar to the popular role-playing games *Vampire: The Masquerade* and *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, assuming that by 'eerily similar' we mean 'taken from the back of a van with no questions asked.'"—Grant Watson, *Fiction Machine*, July 20, 2020.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kate Beckinsale (Selene); Scott Speedman (Mic-hael); Michael Sheen (Lucian); Shane Brolly (Kraven); Bill Nighy (Viktor); Erwin Leder (Singe); Sophia Myles (Erika); Robbie Gee (Kahn); Wentworth Miller (Dr. Adam); Kevin Grevioux (Raze); Dennis Kozeluh (Dignitary); Scott McElroy (Soren); Todd Schneider (Trix).

CREW: Screen Gems, Lakeshore Entertainment, Subterranean Productions UK Ltd. Underworld Productions, and Laurinfilm present *Underworld*. Casting: Deborah Aquila, Tricia Wood, Celestia Fox. Production Designer: Bruton Jones. Costume Designer: Wendy Partridge. Special Effects: Patrick Tatapoulos Design, Professional Vision Care Associates, Fantasy II Film Effects, Framestore CFC, Luma Pictures, NTropic. Music: Paul Haslinger. Director of Photography: Tony Pierce-Roberts. Film Editor: Martin Hunter. Producers: Gary Lucchesi, Tom Rosenberg. Executive Producers: Robert Bernacchi, Terry McKay, Skip Williamson, Henry Winterstern. Story by: Kevin Grevioux, Len Wiseman, Danny McBride. Written by: Danny McBride. Directed by: Len Wiseman. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 121 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Living in secret from humanity, Vampires and Lycans have been fighting a war for generations, but now one human, Michael (Speedman) holds the key in his genetic make-up to forging a peace between the clans. Alas, there are hard-liners in the Vampires who would rather fight to the death than accept a peace that might threaten their pure blood line. A vampire “death dealer,” Selene (Beckinsale), an avowed hater of the Lycans, protects Michael and must re-examine her loyalties as she learns more about her own people, and the terrible origin of the Lycans.

COMMENTARY: The previews and trailers for *Underworld* made it look as if director Len Wiseman and Danny McBride had assembled their new horror action films from the spare parts leftover from *The Crow* (1994), *Dark City* (1998), *Blade* (1998) and *The Matrix* (1999). Let us just declare that leather and martial arts movements appeared in abundance in these commercials.

The previews and trailers were not wrong.

Some of the advanced press also described *Underworld* as a variation of *Romeo and Juliet*, with lovers of opposing clans, Michael and Selene, facing the disapproval of and, and indeed, violence, of their respective and monstrous families.



Clad in leather and armed to the hilt, Kate Beckinsale fronts the long-lived *Underworld* movie franchise as the Death Dealer, Selene.

In this case, however, the previews were wrong.

This film is not exactly Shakespeare. Intriguingly, the third film in the *Underworld* cycle, *Rise of the Lycans* (2009), actually gets the *Romeo and Juliet* aspect of the tale right, and is, in many ways, superior to its two predecessors because of it. This first film in the series is over-serious, overlong and muddled in visual presentation.

The Shakespeare comparison doesn't entirely fit here, either because Michael isn't of an opposing clan, at least not completely. He is a human being, and humanity has no dog in the hunt between vampires and Lycans. Therefore, Selene and Michael don't stand in defiance of two tribes, necessarily, even as Michael's deeper origin, as a hybrid, is revealed. And, they are not exactly in love either. At least not yet. They barely touch, and their big kiss is actually a decoy tactic. Again, the third film, *Rise of the Lycans* is successful because it delivers, actually, on the Shakespearean promise that *Underworld* made, though with different characters (Lucian and Sonya are the star-crossed lovers).

Horror fans may not care a whit about Shakespeare, but, presaging *Twilight* (2008), they may care about the ways that *Underworld* rewrites long-standing vampire lore. In *Underworld*, vampires cast reflections, have tamed their appetite for blood, and fight not with their supernatural strength and

incisors, but with lots and lots of guns and bullets. The Lycans are not precisely werewolves of old, either. They also battle with guns and can transform into beasts anytime they desire. They are not beholden to the cycles of the full moon. These are all changes, one must understand, that reduce the horror elements of the film, and escalate the action scenes instead.

The 2000s feature a number of franchises, from *Blade*, to *Underworld*, to *Resident Evil*, which move horror in the direction of action, or warfare, and this shift may be a reflection of the post-9/11 milieu. Fighting the “evil-doers” becomes the province of an army, of a tribe, of a people, not just one hero, despite the prominence of franchise leaders such as the Daywalker, Selene, or Alice.

In addition, films such as *Underworld*, *Blood and Chocolate*, *Twilight*, and *Skinwalkers* all propose battles between tribes or clans with byzantine rules, rituals, and rules of order, and again, this is not a small matter given the specifics of the decade’s War in Iraq. The American army went into Baghdad to take out the dictator Saddam Hussein and was not prepared to deal with the complications of Shia and Sunni Muslims. America was essentially, a third party inserted into a historic relationship of longstanding distrust, suspicion, and hostility. Removing Saddam Hussein may have eliminated a (secular) dictator, but his absence caused a vacuum of power which drew in foreign fighters and reignited the factional rivalries. In a similar fashion, all the decade’s vampires vs. werewolves, or human vs. werewolves-type movies reflect not merely the notion of a new era of open warfare, but of subtly different sects or ideologies vying for power in a world of disorder and chaos.

Disappointingly, our point of identification—humanity—does not possess a clear role in this dark city universe. Are they merely fodder? Do they know about the war? Why is the world a realm of perpetual darkness? Are vampires born as such? Are Lycans born as such? Do they, vampires and wolf men alike, each bite humans to add them to their ranks, and for cannon fodder? And if they do, how can a bloodline claim to be pure? Why do all the vampires sit around a large mansion lounging like European fashion models on antique furniture? Aren’t they at war?

Underworld doesn’t truly explain much of this, but the filmmakers punctuate their film with plenty of sound and fury, and shock and awe. Perhaps the answer lies in production design? The vampires may represent 1920s Europe, decadent and oblivious, while the gritty Lycans despite their “noble houses,” live in grime and technological blight, doing dark experiments, and therefore representing the rise of fascism? That idea is intriguing but doesn’t really jibe with the depiction of the Lycans as rebels with a cause, here and in later films. They are actually more sympathetic than the regal but heartless and hedonistic vampires.

Visually, *Underworld* is aggressively over-edited and therefore confusing in terms of composition. For instance, during the final confrontation, Lucian (Sheen) is wounded in battle. As Selene dukes it out with bad guys, Lucian re-appears to help out, crawling along the floor to her aid. The only problem is that he is wounded in one sewer chamber and re-appears to help in another sewer chamber that appears some distance from the first. So, did he crawl between rooms unnoticed, this leader of the Lycan revolutionaries? His surprise rescue of Selene seems laughable, and impossible, instead of shocking, all due to the editing. In the same final battle, Selene hesitates to kill the villainous leader of the vampires, Viktor (Nighy), as he battles with Michael. Selene actually stops, kneels, and does nothing but brood for a good few minutes so the climactic battle can carry on feet way. Our protagonist sits this one out, it seems, so the director can film a neat fight. Then, when she does leap into the fray, Selene deals the death blow in an (admittedly beautiful), balletic death stroke. This shot was actually featured in commercials for the films, so may not even feel new to some viewers.

Because of the aggressive editing style, much of the action in the film is similarly confusing, or poorly orchestrated/executed. The spatial relationships of the characters are not understandable, and sometimes indecipherable. The movie loves the image of guns blazing away full bore, but never stops to figure out who is shooting at whom, or where characters are positioned in relationship to each other. Fortunately, Beckinsale fronts the action, and regardless of where she stands in the frame, she anchors the film, and is nothing less than poetry-in-motion in her black leather. Selene is one of the key female action stars of the 2000s, along with Milla Jovovich’s Alice in the *Resident Evil* series.

It is great to see strong, smart, decisive female protagonists in the horror films of the 2000s,

especially given some of the backwards-strides of the decades (for example, Bella in *Twilight*, who possesses no agency, and no real will). It's a shame that, in the case of both Beckinsale and Jovovich, the franchises don't always find interesting things for these actors to do and mires them in torrents of CGI and muddled editing.

Rife with shots of bullet fire reflected in cool sunglasses, *Underworld* aspires to be the horror version of *The Matrix*, but it transmits as visually derivative, and lacks the clear, clean editing of the Wachowski picture. The story is so hopelessly byzantine, too, that it is hard to identify with the characters, or understand why they take the actions that they do. The “consequences of this film” to misquote *Underworld*'s dialogue, “will reverberate” through the 2000s for years to come. *Underworld*'s monster tribe-vs-monster tribe action, sect vs. sect, would become a common through line of the decade's action horror, even if, on modern revisit, the film's virtues all involve Beckinsale, and the ascension of death-dealer Selene to the modern pop-culture firmament.

Underworld is muddle world.

Willard * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“Glover dominates the screen, with his magnificent, 80-minute slow burn in his marvelous performance that engenders empathy and ultimately pity when he goes too far. Willard isn't legitimately evil, and with this shade of gray, we empathize. He is a man marooned on an emotional island: Think of it as *Survivor*—only the rats eat instead of being eaten.”—Kevin M. Williams, *Chicago Tribune*: “Willard and rats return with horror—and a few laughs,” March 14, 2003.

“This remake of *Willard* isn't much of anything: the opening credit sequence is second-rate art school stop-motion animation; the cast is an assemblage of good actors stuck with one-note characters like the evil boss (R. Lee Ermey) and the sympathetic co-worker (Laura Elena Harring); and the tone is hysterical and overcooked, which renders nothing scary and removes most of the sympathy we develop for the lonely Willard. But...[T]here is surprisingly good stuff here: A funny, very nasty visit by a cat to Willard's rat-overrun home, and a seriously unsettling air of airless claustrophobia, underscored by the use of cages and mesh grates to suggest Willard's mental prison.”—Christopher Borrelli, *The Toledo Blade*, March 14, 2003.

“The original *Willard* was a pretty straightforward adaptation of a really neat novel (*Ratman's Notebooks*—hunt it down if you haven't read it). The remake is delightfully odd, a natural showpiece for all the weirdness that is Crispin Glover. It's Glover's show all the way (and ideally accompanied by a delightfully weird score by the late-great Shirley Walker), although R. Lee Ermey is every bit as evil as Ernest Borgnine was in the original, perhaps a bit more fun, though, thanks to some scenery chewing.

The ending is different from the 1971 original, and that might be a little disappointing—Willard paying the ultimate price made the original a horror film at its heart, where the remake isn't quite as sure of its horror pedigree—but as an odd showcase for Crispin Glover, you can't go wrong with this. This is another film I'm surprised hasn't developed a cult following. Be on the lookout for 1971's Willard Bruce Davison in his cameo as a picture of 2003 Willard's father!”—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Crispin Glover (Willard); R. Lee Ermey (Mr. Martin); Laura Elen Harring (Cathryn); Jackie Burroughs (Mrs. Stiles); Kimberly Patton (Ashlyn Gere); William S. Taylor (Mr. Garter); Edward Horn (Colquitt); Guy Lynch (George Foxx); Lara Sadiq (Janice Mantis); David Parker (Detective Boxer). Ty Olsson (Officer Salmon); Kristen Cloke (Psychiatrist).

CREW: New Line Cinema and Hard Eight Pictures presents *Willard*. Casting: John Papsidera. Costume Designer: Gregory Mah. Production Designer: Mark Freeborn. Cinematography: Robert McLachlan. Film Editor: James Coblentz. Music: Shirley Walker. Producers: Glen Morgan, James Wong. Executive Producers: Richard Brener, Bill Carraro, Toby Emmerich. Based on the novel by: Stephen Gilbert. Based on the screenplay by: Gilbert Ralston. Written and Directed by: Glen Morgan. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 100

SYNOPSIS: A lonely, socially awkward young man, Willard Stiles (Glover), lives at home with his sick mother (Burroughs), and is mistreated by his boss at work, Mr. Martin (Erney), who has usurped the business that Willard's family once owned. Willard befriends a white rat, Socrates, and a black rat, Ben, and uses the animals to attempt to violently right the wrongs in his life. But soon, Ben rebels.

COMMENTARY: The original *Willard* is a great horror film of the 1970s, in part because it is much more than a "when animal attacks" film about rats, and in the mode of Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). That film is about two things. The first is the cycle of abuse. The second is systemic racism. In the 1971 effort, Willard ultimately treats his pet rats no better than anyone has treated him. He has been victimized by Mr. Martin and his mother, and he soon treats those he has power over in exactly the same fashion. The message is that long-time abuse can create not just victims, but a new cycle of violence and power. Those who know only mistreatment can only mistreat others.

The second idea is more controversial, but apt. In the original film, *Willard* lavished love and attention on a white rat, Socrates. Socrates lived in his house, slept in his bed, and was treated with affection and great care. Meanwhile the dutiful Ben (the black rat) had to live down in the basement and was used by Willard as an attacker against his enemies.

What was the obvious difference between them? Only the color of their fur/hair.

Yet Willard saw one as a pet and a friend, and the other only as a tool to achieve a goal. This metaphor carried on into the film's sequel, with Ben launching an attack of his "woke" rat friends against the human establishment in Los Angeles. The rat army made its stance, and was beaten back by white oppression, utilizing fire hoses.

The message of both films was unmistakable in the era of the Civil Rights movement.

Another factor which made the original *Willard* so powerful a film was the performance of Bruce Davison. Willard, despite the terrible things he did, was still a sympathetic and human character. The audience felt sorry for him, and to some extent, forgave his trespasses, at least those involving the cycle of abuse (if not the lousy way he treated Ben). The mode of the film was naturalistic. It was real, heartfelt and surprisingly moving.

The 2003 remake from Glen Morgan is not a terrible film, but it is a lesser film because it fails to capitalize or even expand on the original film's considerable virtues. Although the cycle of abuse idea is still powerful here, with Martin mistreating Willard, and Willard coming to mistreat Ben, the metaphor about racism is absent almost entirely. To its credit, the movie attempts to inject a subtext about the modern world of business, and economics in America in its place. A character notes (nudge, nudge) that "*Business is a rat race*," and Mr. Martin has a poster in his office that reads "*prudent aggression*," a meaningless corporate jargon that permits avarice and corruption, and reminds one of a term Mitt Romney used, "*creative destruction*," or other such business terminology. The filmmakers are certainly on to something with this, especially in the immediate post-Enron age, when America was in another economic recession that was due to the avaricious over-reach of rich executives and permitted by lax government oversight. Willard asks aloud, for example "*why do I have to pay for what my parents did?*" In an age of foreclosure and eviction, this is not a small question.

The film sees Ben dealing with "*unsettled debts*." His house has been refinanced and now belongs to the bank. As the film points out, he has no home, no job, no prospects, and ultimately no love in his life, either. Why is it always the little guy who gets the shaft in these down turns? They are not the ones with the golden parachutes. The executives who cooked the books, who set the corrupt policy, get away with their millions, virtually scot free. And the little guy can't pay his healthcare, his mortgage, or support his family.

Accordingly, in this populist version of *Willard*, Willard takes his revenge to one of those guys, Mr. Martin, so this remake offers a relevant point of view about the issues of its day. Business, by its very

nature, is about winners and losers. The winners will do anything to stay in that camp, including throwing all their employees under the bus. This observation is certainly true of Mr. Martin. He fires Willard and gives him a mere two weeks of severance pay, at Christmas time, no less.

But, again, who among us does not know this truth about business? The commentary about American capitalism is commendable, but certainly not deep. The “rat race” explains for instance, Ben’s revenge against Socrates (he takes his job through literal assassination/creative destruction/prudent aggression!) but not, like the original, Willard’s biased preference for Socrates over Ben in the first place. Since that idea of entrenched discrimination by color is removed almost entirely from the film, the whole narrative makes less concrete sense. Why does this Willard not love Ben, who would do anything for him? If it’s not racism, what’s the reason? When Willard makes his statement “*I love Socrates, but I hate you,*” to Ben, the remark possesses no resonance or deeper connection to the film’s themes. At least, however, a modern sub-text or more aptly, social commentary was attempted.

The more serious problem is the casting of Crispin Glover. From the film’s first moments, it is obvious that this version of Willard is unhinged and dangerous, not merely a social misfit. Accordingly, his story arc is much less interesting. Davison’s Willard was a weak, scared, hen-pecked (by his Mother) fellow who, after suffering indignity after indignity, finally couldn’t take it anymore. He struck buck. By contrast, Crispin Glover’s Willard is a walking time bomb, a miscreant who seems dangerous from the start of the film, and therefore has no real arc or learning to go through. This is a much less subtle, much more two-dimensional reading of a complex character, and accordingly, this film of 2003 boasts virtually none of the original’s subtlety or depth.

Lacking a deep subtext and a nuanced central performance, this film is just a lot flatter and less intriguing than its source material. Again, it’s a remake with a title that could be appended with the words “for Dummies.” The 2000s gives us *The Hitcher* (For Dummies), *When a Stranger Calls* (for Dummies), *Black Christmas* (for Dummies) and here, a dumbed down *Willard*. Audiences get almost the same story as before, usually with better special effects, but little thematic depth or meaning. These remakes, even *Willard*, tend to work on one track of meaning, but not multiple ones. These movies are rollercoasters, but not rollercoasters plus, so-to-speak. They offer the ride, but not the artistic intention and merits of their source materials. This result is, simply put, a betrayal of the horror genre’s greatest social value. The horror film exists to tell audiences, sometimes before they know it, what they should be afraid of, or what is wrong, and roiling inside the culture at the time of the film’s production. Take this element away, and horror becomes toothless, even if the gore and violence is routinely upgraded and intensified.

The filmmakers behind *Willard* attempt to mask the gaps in substance with silly jokes, references for the in-the-know *Scream* audience, which enjoys meta references and “ironic” humor. Here, for instance, an Ice Cream Truck plays the tune “*Three Blind Mice.*” Get it? But while such touches prove that the filmmakers are smart, and make connections to other media, jokes about rats or mice simply cannot replace the unity of a meaningful subtext or social commentary.

Again, the remake of *Willard* is not an embarrassment. It is not a bad film. R. Lee Erme is terrific in the role that Ernest Borgnine played, Mr. Martin, and the film’s special effects are solid. But the bottom line is that this story has been told before. It isn’t even that this particular story was told better. It is that it was told *deeper* the first time around. Why remake a deep film and make a shallow one in its place? What is the value there, except to mine a brand name?

Again, reckoning with remakes of popular films requires complex thinking. Is it fair to judge a film by what isn’t there? By what is not present in the film? If a movie or television series takes on the name of something that was beloved and meaningful to a previous generation, then this author’s answer is a resounding affirmative. One can’t know and love the original *Willard*, and all it conveyed, and be satisfied with a new version that conveys less, and does so less seriously, less artistically. The best remakes are those which re-interpret or reinvigorate the original material by taking a new perspective, by seeing the material not as an opportunity to make ironic jokes, but as an opportunity to view the modern culture of the remake through the source material’s story. This *Willard* genuflects to that idea, by criticizing Big Business, but it’s an idea that is not deep or thoughtful, and not intrinsically related to

the film's relationships.

This is the cartoon, CliffsNotes version of *Willard*, with self-knowing jokes, campy performances, and no deep underlying meaning to make the film memorable, meaningful or relevant to modern audiences.

Rats.

Wrong Turn ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"On first inspection, 2003's *Wrong Turn* might have come across as a rip-off (or homage, if one wants to be polite about it) to classic '70s horror films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes*. Nowadays it might come across as one of the films that inspired the remakes of those films. It's a less successful retread of the 'fear of small town America,' genre that took off in the 70's, but *Wrong Turn* owes more to the movies that ripped the classic 70's horror films off—films like *Tourist Trap* and *The Prey* with a taste of the also-derivative *Jeepers Creepers* thrown in for good measure."—Andre Dellamorte, *Collider*, October 10, 2009.

"*Wrong Turn* is derivative, then, but kudos to helmer Rob Schmidt for keeping things tense. Unlike so many Hollywood gloss jobs that opt for slasher chic, this aims to truly unsettle utilizing handheld cameras, muddy earth tones and genuinely vicious deaths to get its malicious way. And while there's a smattering of bad dialogue and the obligatory emphasis on pert breasts straining in tiny tops, the two leads (Desmond Harrington and Eliza Dushku) emerge as intelligent, capable characters, consistently exhibiting resourcefulness to outwit their pursuers."—*Total Film*, June 27, 2003.

"*Wrong Turn* is a thrill-a-minute campy horror in the spirit of horror movies from the old days (1970s and 80s). The movies low budget turns out to be a boon. With no graphics to speak of, sparse sets and a simple plot, this film returns to what used to work in the horror genre, instead of sacrificing scares for visual excitement."—Damon Burke, *Arizona Daily Sun*, June 8, 2003.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Eliza Dushku (Jessie Burlingame); Desmond Harrington (Chris Flynn); Emmanuelle Chriqui (Carly); Jeremy Sisto (Scott); Kevin Zegers (Evan); Lindy Booth (Francine); Julian Richings (Three Finger); Gary Robbins (Saw-Tooth); Ted Clark (One-Eye); Yvonne Gaudry (Halley); Joel Harris (Rich); David Huband ('Trooper'); Wayne Robson (Old Man); James Downing (Trucker).

CREW: Twentieth Century-Fox, Summit Entertainment, Constantin Films, McOne, Stan Winston Studio, in association with Newmark, Regency Enterprises and DCP Wrong Turn Productions presents *Wrong Turn*. Casting: Anya Colloff, Jennifer Fishman Pate, Amy McIntyre Britt. Costume Designer: Georgina Yarhi. Production Designer: Alicia Keywan. Music: Elia Cmiral. Director of Photography: John S. Bartley. Film Editor: Michael Arlen Ross. Producer: Erik Feig, Brian Gilbert, Robert Kulzer, Stan Winston. Executive Producers: Don Carmody, Aaron Ryder, Patrick Wachsberger. Written by: Alan McElroy. Directed by: Rob Schmidt. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In rural West Virginia, a couple of college students out rock climbing for the weekend are savagely murdered by ghoulish inbred locals. A few days later, two other parties fall prey to the same murderous hillbillies. Medical student, Chris Flynn (Harrington), attempting to avoid traffic, takes a forgotten road into the backwoods. There, he meets the other group—consisting of Jessie (Dushku), Carly (Chriqui), Scott (Sisto), Evan (Zegers) and Booth (Francine). Their vacation trip has been sidelined by a flat tire. Now, Chris, Jessie and the others seek sanctuary from the hillbilly family as they are picked off, one at a time. A ranger tower proves shelter for a short while, before the hillbillies burn it down, forcing the survivors to jump from the sanctuary to surrounding trees. Before long, only Chris and Jessie are left alive, and a final confrontation occurs on the hillbilly home turf, a cabin in the woods.

COMMENTARY: The road trip gone awry or “road trip terror” movie format reaches a gory zenith in the harrowing *Wrong Turn*, a neo classic of the horror genre. Although the film is clearly a development of such classics road horrors such as Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and Wes Craven’s *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), the post-9/11 milieu infuses the story with a fresh sense of meaning, and a deep relation to the culture which created it.

A number of “road trip terror” movies were produced and released from 2001 to 2009, and the question might rightly be asked why this format was suddenly brought into the spotlight. The best answer might just be based on one word: fate. Even this film’s title, *Wrong Turn*, suggests fate, or destiny, if one prefers. In films of this type, characters exist in the normal, sunlit world of modern America, a place of peace, prosperity, and useful technology (cars, cell phones, etc.). The characters take one wrong turn, and find themselves adrift, terrorized, and worse, as all the safety and security of modern America disappears. The shift from the world of civilization to the world of savagery appears random. That other world of danger, that world of darkness, is just a single car turn away from our modern world of safety and security. The whole 9/11 attack experience is quite the same. Thousands of Americans in Manhattan—a modern utopia of technology and affluence—went to work on a sunny Tuesday morning, only to find that they too had taken a “wrong turn” into terror. They started the day with Starbucks’ and cellphones but found, upon reaching their jobs at the World Trade Center, that they were faced with unexpected and unspeakable horrors. Suddenly, they had to choose whether to stay or run. Suddenly, they had to choose whether to brave a death by fire, or death by jumping out a window. Decisions that couldn’t have been imagined by these Americans when they woke up that morning became very real, very immediate choices by 10:00 a.m. the same day.



Wrong Turn's (2003) Jesse (Eliza Dushku) is lost in the woods of West Virginia on an ill-fated road trip.

It is gruesome to think about.
And never anything to be taken lightly.
But given the horror of the scenario, Americans began asking questions about fate. How was it possible that the normal world had interfaced with the abnormal world so suddenly? After the attacks, the media reported stories of those who, for some reason, decided not to go to work that day, or were running late, and how they were spared the grim destiny of the nearly 3,000 Americans who went to work on a normal day, only to find it wasn't a normal day at all. The road trip terror movies very much key on this powerful idea, prevalent in the American culture at the time, that a seemingly regular day could shift instantly to one of terror and death.

Wrong Turn provides a metaphor for the 9/11 attacks in the entirety of its set-up. It features several affluent young Americans, including a professional (Chris), who are having a bad day, but a normal day, but then, after taking a detour on a forgotten road, face mutilation, terror and death. They are attacked by a band of killers who, visually, represent the Other, the mutant Mountain Men. It is not hard to substitute these monsters for those of Al Qaeda, Middle Eastern men with a different belief system, who attacked America on that day.

The survivors of the Mountain Man attacks seek refuge in a beacon of civilization, the forest ranger tower, but these local "terrorists" set fire to the tower, forcing those inside, not so safely, in the upper cabin, to jump from the high windows to survive. Today certainly, but in 2003, without question, the comparison to America's national trauma was plain. The Americans who died in the World Trade Center towers on 9/11 had to make the same choice as those in the ranger tower in *Wrong Turn*. They had to choose to die by fire if they remained or attempt to jump from what they had believed represented safety, on a wing and a prayer. Only here, in the fictional wrong turn, that jump is survivable. In real life, of course, it was not.

The tower, the band of "primitive others" who attacked them (using non-traditional weaponry) and the Americans suddenly thrust into a world of horror on what should have been a normal day all reflect America's nightmare day of September 11, and so *Wrong Turn* utilizes the road terror movie to comment on the contemporary world in the same way that *The Hills Have Eyes* might have been said to comment on the Vietnam War, for example.

Again, to be clear, this author believes that the highest purpose of the horror film, as an artistic format, is to draw parallels between life and art; to help the percipient contextualize those things which they fear the most. The harrowing *Wrong Turn* digs deep into the post-traumatic stress so many Americans felt over 9/11 by getting to the root of that horror. The horror wasn't so much the enemy. It wasn't so much the conflict. It was reckoning, instead, with the unbelievable, unacceptable reality that the world we live in—the world of technology, affluence, and peace—can be destroyed in an instant by a twist of fate, by, literally, a wrong turn.

The 9/11 metaphors carry through in other ways as well. Authority is useless in the film, unable to prevent the murders. Here, a helpful ranger shows up in the final act, and quickly gets an arrow through the eyeball. His death is another symbol that the products of a civilized society (law enforcement) are useless in a world where the rules are different. Similarly, the young characters embody great heroism. "Scott died protecting us," a character notes, but again, one must remember the heroic citizens of Flight 93. They died protecting the Capitol, but they died, nonetheless. They too were called upon to make a choice that they couldn't have imagined making when they woke up on the morning of 9/11/2001.

Wrong Turn cements many of the tropes or ideas that dominate the road trip terror movies of the 2000s. First, there is the "Last Chance Gas Station," the borderland between civilization and savagery. This locale is often run by people associated with the savagery, but who "pretend" to be civilized. Then, there is the discovery of the "Lost and Found," or Belongings Room, where the monsters store the video cameras, cell phones, and other artifacts and technology of civilized life that they have stolen from their victims. In *Wrong Turn*, the Belongings Room is amusingly referred to as the "garage sale from Hell." This lost and found, or room of belongings, represents the fact that the borderlands have been crossed, and that the tools of the civilized world are not useful in the chaotic terrain of the savage. The video cameras, the cell phones (with no reception), the cast-off coolers or drivers' licenses are all just hunks of

useless plastic, artifacts of a world that didn't, actually, provide the security its citizens believed it did.

Literally, *Wrong Turn* is about a local society of savage hillbillies living, undetected in a region of America that many of us might have qualms about visiting. But in practice, it is about a group of average Americans awaking to find that they have transitioned into a new world of savagery. At one point in the action, they have the opportunity to kill the Mountain Men as they sleep, but don't take it. Jessie and the others struggle, throughout the film, not only to battle these monsters, but to accept the reality of their new home, the "dead end" world of the Mountain Men, which is reached by a forgotten road that "parallels" the highway. Again, all this terminology and dialogue reinforces, subtly but brilliantly, the idea that if we take one wrong turn, we will slip into an "alternate" truth, or reality, one where the rules we abide by, and the technology we depend on, will provide us no solace, and no help.

Wrong Turn is intense, gory and marked by solid performances. Most importantly, director Schmidt is wise to keep the troop of savage mountain men out of close focus. They are seen mostly in motion, or the director features them in intense, disorienting close-ups, so that they don't become cartoony, or over familiar until the final moments of the last act. The later films in the *Wrong Turn* saga are not terrible, actually, but they also don't capture the raw power of this first film in the franchise. Three Fingers and the others eventually become familiar, at least in their grisly appearance, and some sense of surprise and repulsion is lost the longer the saga continues.

But on a first viewing, *Wrong Turn* is brutal, smart, edgy, and laser-focused on the things that terrorized America in the 2000s. The film rarely gets enough credit for its virtues, but in 2003, *Wrong Turn* was terrifying, and resonant in a way that mustn't be minimized. The Savage Cinema goes back to the 1970s, but the psychological gestalt around the 9/11 attacks gave the format a new, immediate life, and *Wrong Turn* is one of the finest examples of that trend.

TIMELINE: 2004

January 8: A reality show called *The Apprentice* premieres on NBC and is hosted by Donald Trump. The series supports the narrative that would carry Trump to the White House in 2016: that he is a great and cunning businessman (despite the six times his companies declared bankruptcy between 1991 and 2009).

January 19: Democratic Senator John Kerry wins the Iowa Caucus. Previous Democratic front-runner, Vermont's Howard Dean, utters the infamous "Dean Scream," which knocks him out of contention for the Democratic nomination.

February 4: Mark Zuckerberg creates Facebook, a social network.

February 25: Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is released theatrically. Critic Roger Ebert terms it the most violent film he has ever seen.

March 10: President Bush clinches enough delegates to be the Republican nominee for President.

March 11: Madrid, Spain, suffers a terrorist attack at a train station that kills 192 people.

April 28: *60 Minutes II* airs a special about massive human rights violations and abuse at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq, an American detention camp. There, officers of the

U.S. Military are reported and seen in pictures, committing abuses of captives.

June 5: Ronald Reagan, 40th President of the United States, passes away.

June 15: The celebrity sex tape featuring Paris Hilton, *1 Night in Paris*, is released on DVD.

June 25: Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a film critical of President Bush, is released in theaters and promptly becomes the highest grossing "documentary" in history.

June 28: The U.S.-led coalition in Iraq transfers sovereignty to Iraq's new Interim Government.

July 1: The U.S. Press reports that Vice President Cheney told Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy to "go fuck yourself" on the Senate floor following a debate.

August 24: Chechen suicide bombers launch attacks on Moscow.

September 5: A book criticizing John Kerry's war record, *Unfit for Command*, becomes the *New York Times* #1 Best Seller (non-fiction). The book is part of the Swift Boat campaign against the veteran. The term "Swift-boating" quickly becomes a short-hand for a political hit (and hack) job.

September 8: The Killian Memos are made public, revealing George W. Bush's National Guard Records, and the apparent fact that he went AWOL for a time. The documents supporting these accusations are widely held to be false, and CBS and Dan Rather face national condemnation over them.

September 24: The first episode of the series *Lost* (2004–2011) airs. It concerns the survivors of a plane crash trapped on a strange and mysterious island. The success of the series reignites scripted television after the recent success of game shows and reality TV.

October 9: At the second presidential debate between John Kerry and George W. Bush, a hump is seen on the President's back, causing some to speculate that a transmitter is feeding him answers to questions.

October 10: House and Home Diva Martha Stewart is sent to jail for lying about a stock sale (ImClone).

October 11: Sinclair Broadcasting airs a negative documentary about John Kerry called "Stolen Honor: Wounds that Never Heal" on 62 TV stations across the United States that it owns.

October 29: Just as John Kerry gains traction in the polls, a new tape from Osama Bin Laden is released, which has the effect of lifting President Bush's poll numbers.

November 2: Despite exit polls showing John Kerry ahead, George W. Bush wins re-election. Turnout is high, but Bush wins by the closest margin ever for a victorious sitting president. Bush interprets this as a mandate.

December 21: Iraqi insurgents attack U.S. base in Mosul, killing 22 American soldiers.

Alien vs. Predator * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“...Ripley replacement Sanaa Lathan manages to shine during the thrilling finale. Slime-encrusted face-offs between monster-movie icons are what this guilty pleasure is all about, and that’s where Anderson really delivers. The epic spaceship moments and a loony twist ending are a bonus.”—Alan Jones, *Radio Times*, retrieved August 26, 2020.

“This was a neat idea to 15-year-old boys everywhere—this past one included—and to give it some mild praise, *AvP* leans into the shameless fan-service with charming abandon; the Predator’s razor-wire net is neat as hell, and slicing a Facehugger in half with a shuriken has a sure gonzo appeal.”—Shaun Munro, *Flickering Myth*, June 2, 2020.

“Without giving away much, the last remaining human teams up with one side against the other. But this potentially Hawksian theme is ruined by inept horror scenes, staged with exactly the same setup and timing as thousands of other horror films. When the attractive young cast begins dying off, it causes no more reaction than the minutes ticking by.”—Jeffrey M. Anderson, *Combustible Celluloid*: “Monster Mash,” August 12, 2004.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sanaa Lathan (Alexa Woods); Raoul Bova (Sebastian de Rosa); Lane Henriksen (Charles Bishop Weyland); Ewen Bremner (Graeme Miller); Colin Salmon (Maxwell Stafford); Tommy Flanagan (Mark Verheiden); Joseph Rye (Joe Connors); Agathe de La Boulaye (Adele Rousseau); Carsten Norgaard (Rusten Quinn); Sam Troughton (Thomas Parks); Petr Ják (Stone); Pavel Bezdek (Bass); Kieran Bew (Klaus); Carsten Voigt (Mikkel); Jan Filipensky (Boris); Adrian Bouchet (Sven); Andy Lucas (Juan Ramirez).

CREW: Twentieth Century–Fox, Davis Entertainment, Brandywine Productions, Lonlik Productions, Stilling Films, Kut Productions, Studio Babelsberg, and Inside Track Films presents *Alien vs. Predator*. Casting: Suzanne M. Smith. Production Designer: Richard Bridgland. Costume Designer: Magali Guidasci. Special Effects: Amalgamated Dynamics, Animated Extras, Moving Picture Company, Double Negative, Cinesite, Framestore—CFS, Universal Production Partners. Music: Harald Kloser. Director of Photography: David Johnson. Film Editor: Alexander Berner. Producers: Gordon Carroll, John Davis, David Giler, Walter Hill. Executive Producers: Wyck Godfrey, Thomas M. Ham-mell, Mike Richardson. Based on characters created by: Dan O’Bannon, Ronald Shussett, Jim Thomas, John Thomas. Story by: Paul W.S. Anderson, Dan O’Bannon, Ronald Shussett. Written and Directed by: Paul W.S. Anderson. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In October of 2004, a satellite belonging to robotics genius Charles Bishop Weyland (Henriksen) detects a heat signature 2,000 feet below the ice of Antarctica. Soon, satellite imagery makes out a subterranean pyramid of unknown origin. Bishop quickly assembles a team, including guide Alexa Woods (Lathan), archaeologist De Rosa (Bouva), chemical engineer Graeme Miller (Bremner), and mercenaries Verheiden (Flanagan), Quinn (Norgaard) and Adele Rousseau (De La Boulaye) to investigate the pyramid. When the team arrives at remote Bouvetøya Island, it discovers that someone else has already drilled down to the vast pyramid. Alexa leads the way down, though she boasts reservations about Bishop, who is dying of lung cancer, participating in the mission. In the subterranean cave far below, Bishop, Alexa and the other humans discover that they have walked into a trap; a trap sprung by beings called Predators who were once revered as Gods by primitive man. Now, the human beings are to be “fodder” for another alien race: fierce serpents who gestate inside living human hosts. Alexa attempts to survive, even as the two alien species go to war.

COMMENTARY: There’s a moment that feels like authentic cinematic destiny in *Alien vs. Predator* (2004), or rather, *AVP*. From opposite corners—left and right—two classic movie monsters enter the same frame and cast wary eyes on one another for the first time. The battle is joined. The moment may work in a manner other than that as well, and perhaps in a way not entirely intended. A fruition of fan boy dreams and fantasy, this meeting of the monstrous minds may also represent the first time in either franchise’s history that geek or fan desires are, well, pretty much the point of the whole enterprise.

Matters such as narrative, character, theme and humanity are given short shrift so that two of the greatest silver screen monsters in history can duke it out. In short, the movie *is* its title. Audiences get exactly what the words *Alien vs. Predator* promise: a wrestling match between two extra-terrestrial menaces of different characteristics, but equal power or strength.



In a heroic final battle, Weyland (Lance Henriksen, right) confronts a Predator, in *AVP* or *Alien vs. Predator* (2004).

When the film premiered, in 2004, it was advertised with the tagline “*whoever wins ... we lose*,” and many critics ran with that self-inflicted wound, noting the veracity of the studio advertisement.

Still, this could have been a lot worse.

If you desire to see two of the greatest horror movie monsters treated in genuinely shabby fashion, just spend ninety or so minutes with *Alien vs. Predator Requiem* (2007). That movie illustrates by example just how much *Alien vs. Predator* actually gets right. Certainly, the underlying notion of *AVP* feels very 2000s. Viewers are offered a choice to side with either the Predator or the Alien. Any reasonable human being would choose as Alexa does in the film, to ally with the predator. Like her, it wishes to survive. Like her, it possesses a kind of human intelligence. Like her, it knows how to fashion and utilize weapons. But again, the dynamic of evil fighting evil was a near-constant in the 2000s, from *Pitch Black* (2000), to *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), to *AVP* (2004) and beyond. This was a decade in which it seemed the best choice was the lesser of two evils, even if not everyone could agree on which “monster” that happened to be.

But moving beyond invidious comparisons to the worst film in either monster line, *Alien vs. Predator* possesses merit on its own terms. First, the 2004 grudge-match features some remarkable and imaginative visualizations, particularly in terms of its flashback sequence. And secondly, two characters seen in the film manage to make the enterprise feel like more than just a by-the-number monster-on-monster contest.

AVP’s biggest deficits, by contrast, involve the nature of the action—which is toothless—and the depiction of the vast majority of human characters. Other than Henriksen and Lanaa’s characters, the majority of the people in the movie are—as the script describes them—literally cattle to be manipulated by one “monster” side or the other.

Whatever its flaws, *Alien vs. Predator*’s flashback imagery—of Predator strutting atop pyramids, hovering spaceships behind them—remains powerful stuff. The script is clever in the way it accounts for the disappearance of Mayan culture. It showcases a hunt gone wrong, and the deployment of a Predator self-destruct mechanism on Earth. Similarly, human sacrifices are re-purposed to involve the aliens in a way that is imaginative, and yet doesn’t seem like a stretch. The best imagery in the film, in fact, involves the Predators and humans battling teeming aliens, defending Earth territory from the “serpents” before that apocalypse occurs. The imagery is spectacular, and it suggests that aliens and predators have always been with us, we just didn’t know it.

A truly bold *AVP* film might have been set during that encounter, in that civilization, with man playing an even more peripheral role. Critics couldn’t very well complain about paper-thin characters and characterizations, if no one spoke English, and the main characters were Predator “Gods” in an Aztec or Mayan city, right?

Another powerful image in the film involves Alexa Woods and the weapons predator, Scar, gives to her. She receives an alien tail as a spear, and an alien head as a kind of glove/shield/armor that stretches up her arm. This imagery reveals a lot about how the Predators regard their prey, and—even more than that—acts as a pointed call-back to both the flashback scenes, and the finale of *Predator* (1987). In the latter case, Dutch (Arnold Schwarzenegger) had to go “primitive” and prehistoric to fight off an alien threat. In this case, Alexa does the same thing. She uses the resources available to stand in battle beside the Predator. The impression is that we are seeing a timeless partnership replayed in the present for our own eyes. But a human wielding an alien head as a weapon is an unforgettable visual,

Instead of featuring more moments like that one, Paul W.S. Anderson relies on clichés—both visual and written—for much of the film. There’s the dreadful moment that you will recognize from all action movies of the 2000s, in which Scar and Alex, for example, outrun a giant fireball. It’s such a hackneyed visual at this time and could be piped in from any number of insipid buddy movies. This is a disappointment, since Anderson crafted a great horror film, *Event Horizon* (1997). But facts are facts. The director crafts *Alien vs. Predator* with absolutely no sense of suspense or tension. There is no build-up to the action ... it just happens. The film opens in Antarctica on October 10, 1904, for example, and we follow a person being pursued by something, or some *things*, specifically an alien and a predator. The scene is so rudimentary and by-the-numbers that it makes us feel nothing. The scene’s final jolt doesn’t

provide a good jump scare. When one considers the level of suspense and terror in *Alien* (1979), or even in *Predator* (1987), *AVP* does not feel faithful to what has come before. The filmmakers demonstrate no patience and do nothing to establish the setting or mood before leaping into the horror moments.

Over and over, the action scenes play out in this fashion with no real tension or suspense underlying them. Most grievously, the final battle on the surface with the Alien Queen plays out this way too. The special effects are fine—extraordinary even—but there's no real sense of danger or surprise in the unfolding of the climax. The movie just hums along, oblivious to the notion that its horror isn't sticking the landing. We never feel scared or tense; we never feel the pure terror of these warring giants. It would be something if the scare-less movie could make-up for its lack of suspense and tension with a sense of the visually grotesque. *Alien* and *Predator*, after all, are both R rated franchises, noted for their violence and gore. But in an attempt to appeal to the widest possible audience, *Alien vs. Predator* is PG-13, meaning that almost no real, dynamic or memorable violence is depicted. Every time there is a promise of blood or gore, or even violent impact, the film simply cuts away to another scene, or to a post-impact shot that reveals nothing in terms of damage to body parts. No real suspense plus no real gore makes *Alien vs. Predator* a dull boy, or at least a very bland, generic one.

The characters are mostly fodder, too, for poorly executed, poorly shot death scenes. Few characters register here in the way that Hudson does in *Aliens* (1986), for example, or even the way Johner (Ron Perlman) does in *Alien Resurrection*. There's just nobody that distinctive or memorable, overall. With two important exceptions. First, what sense of humanity *Alien vs. Predator* possesses arises largely from Lance Henriksen. This is his third franchise appearance, and his third variation on the Bishop role. We've seen the innocent child/android (in *Aliens*), the malevolent tempter (*Alien³*) and now the ambitious, determined man behind all that futuristic technology, Charles Bishop. Henriksen brings his trademark humanity to the role and shows us Bishop the climber (willing to go anywhere to achieve his goal), and Bishop the sick man, facing his own mortality. Henriksen gets a great scene with Sanaa Lathan in the film; one where he describes how climbing to a new summit is worth the risk, even if death is the result of the journey. The dialogue is good, but Henriksen makes it soar, and grants the audience a thorough understanding of this flawed but admirable human being. He also gets a great death scene. Refusing to be ignored as harmless (and therefore unimportant) by the Predator, Bishop strikes the hunter with a flame, showing it his teeth. The Predator stops in its track, and gives Bishop the death he has earned, the death of a warrior. It's a fantastic scene, and in many ways, the highlight of the film's action. Bishop didn't get to his position of power by being ignored, by being written off as sick. And if he has to die, he's going to go out the same way as he lived: noticed and notable.

Secondly, Sanaa Lathan is a solid, promising lead as Alexa Woods. She's not Ripley, and yet she displays a similar ability to survive by adaptation. Alexa thinks on her feet, and the audience can see her thinking things through. That quality makes it easy to identify with her, especially since Alexa has to do a lot of catch-up learning about her enemies in the course of the film's action. Specifically, one must admire Lathan's tendency not to over-emote, or mine scenes for melodrama. Instead, she keeps just the right amount of distance from the material. There's one moment in which Scar takes a bloody alien stump to her face, to mark Alexa as a survivor or hunter. She endures it without complaint or drama, but you can see her in her eyes that she is girding herself. No, she probably *doesn't* want an acid scar on her face. But are you going to stop a Predator in his tracks when he is, in his own fashion, honoring you for bravery? In short, Lathan takes the character and material seriously, but doesn't fall into the actor's trap of overplaying scenes that, if exaggerated, could transmit as silly.

This author has read many reviews that claim the fight scenes in *Alien vs. Predator* are too dark, but—having seen *Requiem*—can't make the same observation. Basically, the details of each fight in the film are clear and viewable. The biggest complaint with the monsters in *Alien vs. Predator* is that all the Predators are squat and chunky. They look more like over-fed professional wrestlers, than the lean giant hunters we saw in *Predator* and *Predator 2* (1990). A couple of times, this author was taken out of the film's reality by the short, steroidal stature of the *Predators* here. They resemble musclemen in costumes more than ever before in franchise history.

There are qualities to admire in *Alien vs. Predator*. So why not applaud it more? Perhaps because the pedigree of both franchises is so strong. The *Alien* films are mostly great. Same thing with the *Predator* franchise. You put the two monsters together and get a film that is merely serviceable? It is difficult to say that an average entry like this one really serves either franchise in the long run.

Yet it did.

The film was very profitable. Still, the film feels more like a high-concept gimmick than a fully developed, fully coherent narrative. Indeed, there are points throughout where one may sense the writer and director struggling for some meaty hook that will carry the movie across the finish line. One such idea: *the pyramid is like a prison!* The aliens are escaped inmates, and the guards—the Predators—need their guns. Another idea: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. And finally, the script seems bound and determined to feature endless variations of the joke “you are one ugly ... *fill in the blank.*”

So, *Alien vs. Predator*? Those who choose, may enter. But you do so at your own risk. And again, *Alien vs. Predator* is masterful, accomplished filmmaking in comparison to the follow-up effort: *Requiem*.

Anaconda: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid * * *

Critical Reception

“...this lame Borneo-set sequel does have its moments...”—Matthew Leyland, *Sight and Sound*, November 2004, page 40.

“...an amusingly predictable creature feature ... it is slick and single-minded, and within the realm of its reptile-brained ambitions, it succeeds.”—Joe Williams, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 21, 2004, page E4.

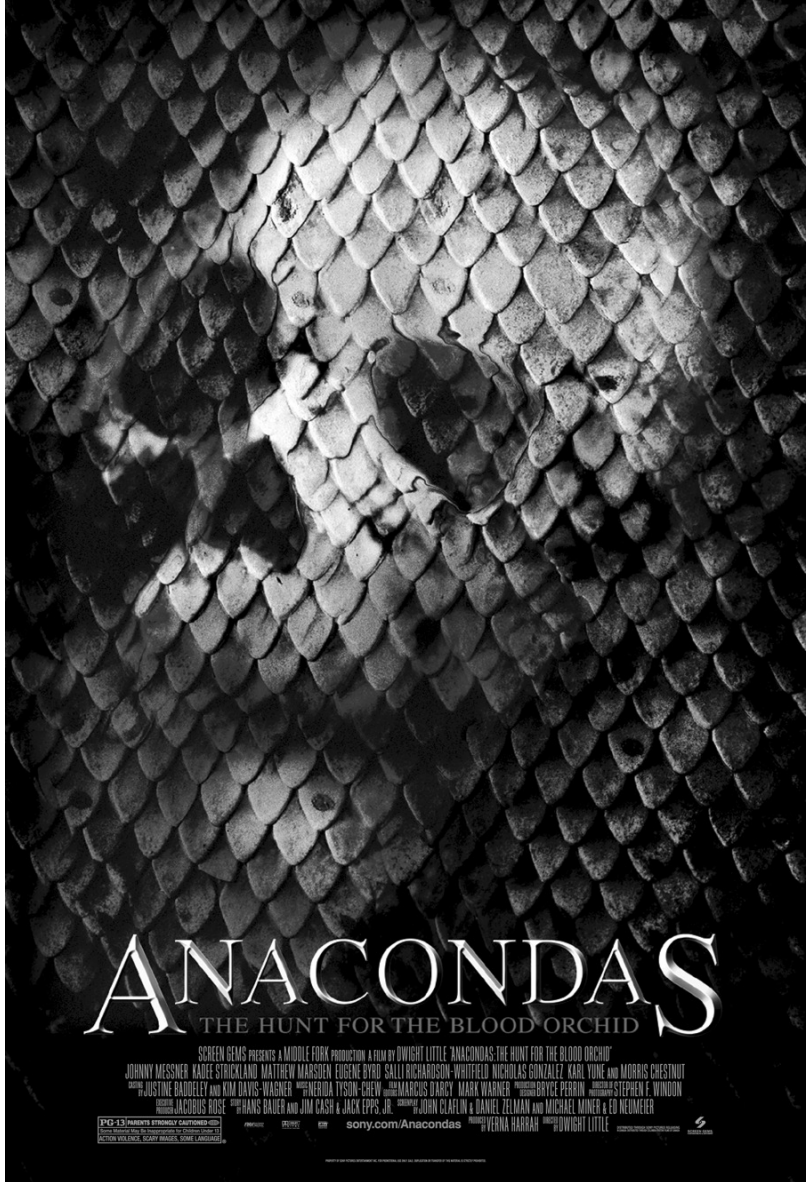
Cast & Crew

CAST: Johnny Mesner (Bill Johnson); KaDee Strickland (Sam Roger), Matthew Marsden (Dr. Jack Byron); Nicholas Gonzalez (Dr. Ben Douglas); Eugene Byrd (Cole Burris); Karl Yane (Tran Wu); Salli Richardson-Whitfield (Gail Stern); Morris Chestnut (Gordon Mitchell); Nicholas Hope (Christian); Andy Anderson (Livingston).

CREW: Screen Gems and Sony Pictures Releasing present a Middle Fork Production, *Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid*. Casting: Justine Baddeley. Costume Designer: Terry Ryan. Production Designer: Bryce Perrin. Music: Nerida Tyson-Chew. Special Effects: Sharp FX. Director of Photography: Stephen F. Windon. Film Editors: Marcus D'Arcy, Mark Warner. Produce: Verna Hannah, Jacobus Rose. Story by: Hans Bauer, Jim Cash, Jack Epps. Written by: John Claflin, Daniel Zelman, Michael Miner, Edward Neumeier. Directed by: Dwight H. Little. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Representatives from a pharmaceutical company charter a boat in Borneo and pay its pilot, Bill Johnson (Mesner), 50,000 dollars to find and harvest local blood orchids, which are the equivalent of the fountain of youth. Unfortunately, the river-ways are flooded, and the boat is destroyed after plunging over a waterfall. The survivors of the wreck head into the jungle and find that giant snakes—anacondas—are hunting them. Worse, the fabled blood orchids may be the source of the anacondas' huge scale and longevity. Scientist Byron (Marsden) refuses to see reason, and instead of calling off the search and proceeding to a rescue point, heads for a snake pit, the breeding ground of the giant anacondas.

COMMENTARY: The sequel to 1997's hit *Anaconda* is a surprisingly solid and enjoyable effort, with a strong grounding in Hollywood history. The film is one part *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), with its story of a monster in the wild, and one part *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), with its story of avaricious corporate raiders and scientists seeking to attain a fortune, or treasure, no matter the human cost. The film is helmed by Dwight Little, director of *Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers* (1988), *Phantom of the Opera* (1989), and installments of *The X-Files* (1993–2002), *Millennium* (1996–1999), and *24* (2001–2010), and he brings a focused, steady hand to the proceedings. The CGI effects look better than they did in the original, and the performances are good enough so that viewers care about who lives, and who dies.



The poster art for *Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid* (2004).

But the real reason that *Anacondas* works is that it works more as an update of a classic jungle adventure movie than as a “giant snake” monster movie. This means it has more in common with *King Kong* (1933) than it does something like *Sharknado* (2005). The search for treasure in a remote, deadly location has been updated to involve Big Business, and a Pharmaceutical company that believes the blood orchid can be the biggest thing since “Viagra.” But more importantly, the movie is really about fear of the water, fear of drowning, fear of being lost, fear of spiders, fear of leeches, and fears of paralysis. The big snake pit at the end of the film represents the movie’s horror climax, of course, but along the way the characters face all kinds of dangers that Americans, in our modern, technological world, don’t face regularly.



The survivors of a doomed expedition in *Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid* (2004) are unaware of the danger lurking in the river below.

The exploitation of these particular fears make *Anacondas* feel like a throwback in the post-9/11 age, yet the film is an entertaining, well-made, satisfying throwback. This is the kind of monster movie that would have been enjoyed by a previous generation of film audiences, and, snakes alive, some simple pleasures remain the best ones. With decent characterizations, good action, and even a continuity nod to the original film (in one character's description of the ill-fated voyage and documentary made in the 1997 film), *Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid* is a sequel that is worth watching.

Blade: Trinity * *

Critical Reception

"Those who are looking for variations on a theme won't find any here. *Blade: Trinity* is a carbon copy of its predecessors. It's all kick-ass attitude and style without any substance to back it up. Yet, where the first two *Blades* satisfied on a visceral level, this one doesn't. That probably has something to do with the portrayal of Dracula who, in human form, looks more like a body builder than a vampire."—James Berardinelli, *Reel Views*, December 2004.

"Sometimes bloody, sometimes bloody awful, *Blade Trinity*, the third installment in Wesley Snipes' vampire chronicles, knocks the franchise out for the Count as veteran series scripter David S Goyer slides into the director's chair. Snipes is back in black as the fearless vampire hunter Blade chasing the legendary Dracula (chubby-faced Dominic Purcell) in a tale that seldom goes for the jugular but quite often nips the funny bone. It's billed as 'The Final Hunt'—and for Blade's sake, you'll hope so."—Jamie Russell, *BBC*, December 10, 2004.

"While watching *Blade: Trinity*, one would not be remiss to wonder if the film was written and directed by a bottle of Axe Body Spray. It simply has that 'cool bro' aesthetic: impractical leather outfits, swords and crossbows and guns, futuristic-looking facial hair, gadgets and explosions, characters with names like 'Jarko Grimwood,' organizations with names like 'The Nightstalkers,' and music by The Crystal Method. It adheres to the 'style over substance' philosophy so hard that there simply is no substance ... and somehow, surprisingly, that's just fine.

Folks don't tend to ride rollercoasters because they enrich your life or deepen your understanding of the human condition. Rollercoasters are but 'thrill rides,' and if a movie was ever deserving of that hackneyed moniker, it's *Blade: Trinity*. Its only goal is to entertain you, and it will likely meet that goal if only you relax your brain a bit (you know, the part of your brain that demands things like 'logic' and 'quality') and let it. It's a movie about a cool vampire who fights other cool vampires, and that's all it aspires to be. It is the notebook drawing of a 12-year-old come to life, fitting, perhaps, as the character Blade originated in the pages of Marvel comics.

There is a simple reason why *Blade: Trinity* succeeds, completely in spite of itself: the cast. The only one who doesn't seem to realize that this is a comic book movie is star Wesley Snipes, who holds as fast to his brooding as he does to his sunglasses. By and large the rest of the ensemble, which includes actors ranging from Kris Kristofferson to professional wrestler Triple H, constantly walk the line between camp and pure farce, and it's a damn delight. Indie queen and critics' darling Parker Posey is not an expected choice to play the villainous, vampiric head of a corporate cabal seeking to resurrect Dracula for some reason, though, to be fair, who would be the expected choice for that? She emerges as the highlight of the film, however, as she seems to have the time of her life chewing every inch of scenery with fangs that don't quite fit her mouth correctly. Countless unnamed characters walk into frame for the sole purpose of being punched by a bare-armed Jessica Biel. Ryan Reynolds takes off his shirt and speaks in quips. Listen, Natasha Lyonne plays a blind scientist and there is a vampire Pomeranian. That is either going to activate the dumb pleasure center of your brain or it isn't. No, *Blade: Trinity* is not a good movie ... but it might just be a great one."—Stacie Ponder, horror scholar and blogger.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Wesley Snipes (Blade); Kris Kristofferson (Whistler); Dominic Purcell (Drake/Dracula); Jessica Biel (Abigail Whistler); Ryan Reynolds (Hannibal King); Parker Posey (Danica Talos); Mark Berry (Vreede); John Michael Higgins (Dr. Edgar Vance); Callum Keith Rennie (Asher Talos); Triple H (Jarko Grimwood); Paul

Anthony (Wolfe); Francoise Yip (Virago); James Remar (Ray Cumberbund); Natasha Lyonne (Sommerfeld).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Shawn Danielle Productions Ltd., Amen Ra Films, Marvel Enterprises, in association with Peter Frankfurt and Imaginary Forces presents *Blade: Trinity*. Casting: Ronnie Yeskel. Production Designers: Patrick Banister, Eric Fraser. Costume Designer: Laura Jean Shannon. Special Effects: Spectral Motion, Digital Dimension, Giant Killer Robots, CafeFX, Amalgamated Pixels, MFX, Pixel Magic, Hatch Productions Smoke and Mirrors Productions, Black Pool Studios, Imaginary Forces Eyetronics, Image Engine, Pixel Liberation Front. Music: Ramin Djawadi, The RZA. Director of Photography: Gabriel Beristain. Film Editors: Conrad Smart, Howard E. Smith. Producers: Peter Frankfurt, David S. Goyer, Lynn Haris, Wesley Snipes. Executive Producers: Avi Arad, Cale Boyter, Toby Emmerich, Stan Lee. Based on characters created by Marv Wolfman and Gene Colan. Written and Directed by: David S. Goyer. M.P.A.A Rating: R. Running time: 113 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Daywalker, Blade (Snipes), sees his friend, Whistler (Kristofferson), apparently murdered, and he is apprehended for the crime. He later teams with Hannibal King (Reynolds) and Whistler's daughter, Abigail (Biel), to get to the truth of the crime. At the same time, the Ancient Evil, Dracula, who goes by "Drake" (Purcell), awakens in the Middle East, and develops a deadly virus to kill all vampires, called "Daystar."

COMMENTARY: *Blade: Trinity* does not live up to the legacy of entertainment established by the earlier *Blade* films. It's a superficial, corny, CGI-fest that commits two terrible crimes. One, it's unremittingly boring. And two, it drifts far afield from Wesley Snipes' character, the protagonist of the film series. There were apparently behind-the-scenes reasons for the latter course of action, and there have long been stories that Snipes behaved, well, controversially, on set.

Love him or hate him, Snipes always strutted front and center in the *Blade* films. Snipes is intense but not talky or over-the-top; and he's occasionally funny, even though he doesn't often crack jokes or one-liners. Snipes invests the Blade character with *gravitas*. He's a terrific anchor for this particular horror-action series. He also moves brilliantly. His movements and poses are not only athletic, they appear to come right out of comic-book frames. Snipes re-connects powerfully with his iconic role in *Blade: Trinity*, but his heroic efforts are to almost no avail. He's saddled with two "young" sidekicks who steal precious screen-time from him.

First, there's the terribly annoying Ryan Reynolds as Hannibal King—a walking collection of bad jokes. And then there's vanilla Jessica Biel as bland Abigail Whistler. From the moment these new characters appear on the screen, one can immediately sense what is occurring here: someone behind the scenes is co-opting the *Blade* franchise to build another franchise for these characters.

And frankly, using appropriate vampire terminology, that sucks.

One doesn't go to a *Blade* movie to see other characters kick vampire ass. That's Blade's job. This sort of switcheroo is disrespectful to Snipes as well as to long-time fans. The films have succeeded wildly with him as the anchor and star and so rightfully the expectation is that this third film would continue the legacy and actually be about Blade. However, that's not the case. He's been asked to front a product that isn't authentically what it should be.

Additionally, likeable Dominic Purcell is badly miscast as "Drake" (Dracula), the villain in *Blade: Trinity*. He's a fine actor, but a bit too heroic, about too square-jawed and "Western" to portray the Ancient Evil that threatens the world and the human race. He's also undermined by his ridiculous costumes. In one sequence Dracula looks like he escaped from the set of William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1981), and in another he wears what appears to be a bustier, resembling a cross-dresser. In his first big confrontation with Blade, Drake runs away from the Daywalker on a merry chase, and the audience might rightly ask at this point: "why is he running away if he's the most powerful vampire in history?" Watch the scene and see if you can figure out why he runs. Like much of the movie, this scene makes no sense. Later scenes establishing his menace and power don't work because we've already seen him flee from Blade.

Not much holds together in this film. There's a scene involving a human "farm" where homeless people are exploited as living blood banks for vampires. Blade and Abigail destroy one such factory, but we are told there are hundreds. Really? How come we never see Blade destroying any of them besides this one? This scene just happens with almost no fanfare and then ends without anybody ever commenting on it or the farms again. Likewise, with the threat of the new virus that can annihilate all vampires. The audience is informed by the maker of the virus that the experimental bioweapon might also kill Blade, but when Blade utilizes the virus in the finale ... nothing. He doesn't cough, sputter or even sneeze. The audience is also told that the self-same virus can spread to all vampires, thus ending their dominion. So why, at the end of the film, isn't Blade using this virus to hunt down all remaining vampires, especially since they have enacted a "Final Solution" against humans (the blood bank farm pogrom)? *Blade: Trinity* lurches from idea to idea, but none of these ideas seem to connect, or impact the narrative.

With Hannibal's lame wisecracks constantly undercutting the tension, Drake not offering much menace, and a confused plot line, *Blade: Trinity* proves an unimpressive film. Even worse, it's cut together in the manner of an *Underworld* or *Aeon Flux*, meaning that the action is virtually incoherent. The editing is relentlessly choppy, so that even Snipes' ultra-cool moves (another reason to see these films...) get lost in the shuffle. Watching *Blade: Trinity*, the impression is that the whole enterprise is flying on autopilot. Another buck is being squeezed out of a franchise, and furthermore, that franchise was being hijacked for the purpose of stealing a future buck! There's not a single surprise in the film; nary an interesting new development. There isn't a moment of authentic excitement or a moment of true horror. It's all familiar and worn out.

The one unexpected bright spot in the film is Parker Posey, playing the vampire villainess Danica Talos. Posey—a veteran of the Christopher Guest films—seems to realize exactly what kind of celluloid quagmire she's stepped into here and so makes the absolute most out of every terrible line, and every silly moment on camera. Posey walks the walk; she talks the talk (through uncomfortable-looking fangs.) and brings, at the very least, a level of charm and self-awareness to the proceedings. People may object to the way Posey camps things up, but like Snipes, she is just about the only other performer in the film who registers as an individual. She saves the movie and steals a few funny moments from a sad death for the franchise.

The Butterfly Effect * * * 1/2

Cast & Crew

CAST: Ashton Kutcher (Evan); Melora Walters (Andrea); Amy Smart (Kayleigh); Elden Henson (Lenny); William Lee Scott (Tommy); Eric Stoltz (Mr. Miller); Callum Keith Rennie (Jason); Lorena Gale (Mrs. Boswell); Ethan Suplee (Jumper); John Patrick Amedori (Evan at 13); Irene Gorovala (Kayleigh at 13); Kevin G. Schmidt (Lenny at 13); Jesse James (Tommy at 13); Logan Lerman (Evan at 7); Sarah Widdows (Kayleigh at 7); Jake Kaese (Lenny at 7); Cameron Bright (Tommy at 7).

CREW: New Line Cinema, BenderSpink, FilmEngine presents, in association with Katalyst Films, *The Butterfly Effect*. Casting: Carmen Cuba. Costume Designer: Carla Hetlend. Production Designer: Douglas Higgins. Music: Michael Suby. Special Effects: Lindala Schminken FX, Healy FX Studios. Director of Photography: Matthew F. Leonetti. Film Editor: Peter Amundson. Producers: Chris Bender, A.J. Dix, J.C. Spink. Executive Producers: Cale Boyter, Richard Brener, Toby Emmerich, Jason Goldberg, David Krintzman, Ashton Kutcher, William Shively. Written and Directed by: Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 113 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Evan (Kutcher) grows up experiencing black-outs and memory loss at times of extreme trauma, including an accident with fireworks, and a neighbor's (Stoltz) attempt to molest him. In

college, Evan realizes he can return to these black out moments and change them, altering reality itself. Following the suicide of the love of his life and childhood friend, Kayleigh (Smart), Evan "time travels" to reshape the present, but each attempt to change reality only seems to make reality worse. As Evan continues to change reality, he learns that his father (Rennie), now in a psych ward, possessed the same power.

COMMENTARY: Fate is one of the key obsessions of the horror films of the 2000s, and especially post-9/11/2001. *The Final Destination* movies concern humans briefly outsmarting their fates, only to be hunted down by Death Itself, which attempts ruthlessly to reassert that fate. *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003) suggests that fate boasts a shape and direction and will find a way to play out as intended, even if delayed. It relates that concept to Judgment Day, the day of Skynet's rise. *The Mothman Prophecies* (2003) positions fate as a kind of "sight" that humankind doesn't have the power to access but which may be within the purview of other, mysterious beings. Even the popular road trip gone wrong paradigm so popular in the 2000s horror films is linked very clearly to the notion of fate. How would your life be different if you and your buddies didn't take that road trip through Texas, or West Virginia, or the Outback?



Young Evan (John Patrick Amedori, right) and Kayleigh (Irina Gorovaia) gaze at an uncertain future in *The Butterfly Effect* (2004).

Again, the relationship to 9/11 is obvious. How would our lives be different if the Twin Towers had not fallen and nearly 3000 Americans been killed on that September day in 2001?

The Butterfly Effect is yet another of the decade's most memorable meditations on the nature of fate, and the dangers of trying to alter its plan. Here, a sensitive psych major with black-outs, Evan, learns he can go back in time to those black-outs and, by acting, steer fate in new directions. But, as Evan also discovers, new destinies or realities are not necessarily preferable to the ones he left behind. The more he interferes in "God's plan," the worse things become. Thematically, the film concerns not just fate, then, but actually human hubris. Evan believes he can make things right for his true love, Kayleigh, but by playing God, he just makes unwanted trouble. At film's end, Evan can save Kayleigh's life, and make things right, only by forsaking the control over fate that he has employed throughout. "*You can't play God*," he is told. Indeed, he must take himself out of the equation, not insert himself into his life, to arrive at a happy ending.



Memory and fate, connected in chaos. Evan (Ashton Kutcher) and Kayleigh (Amy Smart) in the reflection may not share a common fate in *The Butterfly Effect* (2004).

At another point, *The Butterfly Effect* expresses the notion that “You can’t change who people are without changing who you are.” Thus, the movie is not just about fate, but about the way that fates are connected in human existence. The movie’s greatness, in part, arises from the changes Evan learns of himself. In one reality he goes from being a brilliant (but lonely) psych major, to Kayleigh’s boyfriend. But the cost is that he is now a vapid frat boy failing all his classes. Another reality finds Kayleigh alive (her suicide having been averted), but he is in a wheelchair, and has no arms. In one reality, he’s incarcerated, in prison.

The idea here is that if one strand is yanked from the tapestry of life, the whole thing unravels in unpredictable ways. Also, Evan realizes his own selfishness in attempting to rewrite existence. By attempting to insert himself and his notion of a good life into fate’s plan, he only mucks things up. As he comes to realize, he is no longer being altruistic; he is being selfish. And, just as bad, Evan’s attempts to make reality conform to his desires are frying his brain, making him sick. In the final analysis then, *The Butterfly Effect* showcases how the notion of human control over destiny is an illusion, and a dangerous one at that.

Although Kutcher is known primarily for dumb comedies like *Dude, Where’s My Car?* (2000) and the reality TV series *Punk’d* (2003–2012), he provides a good vehicle for audience identification in the film, and his performance is surprisingly sensitive and well-calibrated. Evan is a flawed protagonist, but one that is relatable. He has witnessed terrible things in his life: accidents, abuse, suicide, pathology and tragedy. He aches to turn that reality around, especially for the ill-fated Kayleigh. He boasts good intentions, but the ability to rewrite fate brings about a kind of tunnel vision, a kind of perfectionist mind-set that forces him to go on, instead of leaving well enough alone. *The Butterfly Effect* succeeds to the degree it does, whereas the DTV sequels do not, because the Evan is a tragic, even Shakespearean hero. His flaw is that he can’t, until the denouement, simply leave well enough alone. And by the time he learns that fact, there is a high personal cost to pay. His fate is that he can never be with the woman he loves, Kayleigh, or that, at the very least, he must begin with her again from square one.

The Butterfly Effect also possesses the good sense to hold its narrative together through its exploration of a scientific or mathematical concept that, for many movie fans, was introduced widely in *Jurassic Park* (1993) through the character of Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum): Chaos Theory. This idea, and the idea underlined by the film’s title, is that small, apparently meaningless changes in a disordered system can have outsized and unpredictable consequences because of the system’s underlying interconnectedness. Evan’s odyssey is a perfect depiction of this theory, as his small changes have unpredictable and nightmarish impact on his destiny, and the destiny of those around him.

Again, *The Butterfly Effect* like so many of its brethren from the same decade, comes down to a meditation on how man sees himself and fate. Is he a figure outside of fate, able to change it as he wishes and desires? Or is he part of a system with sense and order, playing a part he doesn’t really understand, or totally perceive?

Club Dread * * ½

Critical Reception

“Casting Paxton as ’70s refugee Coconut Pete was a smart move; armed with a guitar and a mean 5 o’clock shadow, he hams it up in grand style ... the film’s biggest flaw is its excessive Running time: The jokes start wearing thin after the first hour and, by the time the credits finally roll, it’s become the kind of straightforward gorefest it started out ridiculing.”—Ethan Alter, *TV Guide*, Retrieved August 27, 2020.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Elena Lyons (Stacy); Bill Paxton (Coconut Pete); Dan Montgomery, Jr. (Rolo); Tanja Reichert (Kellie); Nat Faxon (Manny); Michael Weaver (Roy); Kevin Heffernan (Lars); Michael Yurchak (Burke); Jordan Ladd

(Penelope); Brittany Daniel (Jenny); Richard Perello (Cliff); Steve Lemme (Juan); Jay Chandrasekhar (Putman); Paul Soter (Dave); Erik Stolhanske (Sam); Lindsay Price (Yu); M.C. Gainey (Hank).

CREW: Broken Lizard Industries, Cataland Films, Coconut Pete Productions, Fox Searchlight Pictures and Twentieth Century–Fox Present *Club Dread*. Casting: John Papsidera. Production Designer: Benjamin Conable. Costume Design: Melissa Bruning. Special Effects: Jose Angel Cordero, Laurencio “Chovy” Cordero, Manuel Cordero, Digital Filmworks, Pacific Title and Art Studios. Music: Nathan Barr. Director of Photography: Lawrence Sher. Film Editor: Ryan Folsey. Producer: Richard Perello. Executive Producers: Lance Hool, Peter E. Lengyel. Written by: Broken Lizard (Jay Chandrasekhar, Kevin Heffernan, Steve Lemme, Paul Soter, Erik Stolhanske). Directed by: Jay Chandrasekhar. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On Pleasure Island, a killer begins to murder the young partygoers with a machete. The dwindling survivors, led by past-his-prime musician and “D”–lister Coconut Pete (Paxton), attempt to ferret out the killer’s motives and identity. But what they find is that everyone on the resort island has behaved immorally in some fashion or another, and therefore could be the ultimate target of “Machete Pete.”

COMMENTARY: The first scene in Broken Lizard’s *Club Dread* sets the vibe effectively. There is weed, sex, and killing. A threesome decides to carry on their carnal activities in an old mausoleum (disrespecting local culture in the process), and before anyone can shout *coitus interruptus*, the party’s over, and people have been brutally and gorily murdered for their transgression. This sequence recalls, specifically, the “vice precedes slice and dice” paradigm of the 1980s slasher format. Then, the counselors or employees at the club are introduced, with stylish labels in freeze frames. There’s “Jenny” (aerobics), “Juan” (watersports), “Putman” (tennis), “Dave,” (DJ/Drugs), and “Sam” (Fun Police). The information age introduction is cute, and jaunty. In combination, the scenes let the audience know that the filmmakers are smart, learned in horror movies, and willing to play with format a bit.

The organizing principle in this amusing slasher is the back catalog of dissolute Coconut Pete’s (Paxton) music career. One of his albums, the amusingly titled “Sea Shanties and Wet Panties,” offers such (non)-hits as “Naughty Cows,” and the killer utilizes the lyrics from the songs to orchestrate the film’s murders. Similarly, the film offers up a red herring, Penelope, and a masked killer. It’s all by-the-book slasher style. What may prove more interesting is that the idea of the transgression or crime in the past is also revived for the film, with each of the characters being revealed as a fraud, a phony, a crook, or some such other anti-social type. The killer could, perhaps reasonably, have a vendetta against any of them. Juan went to jail for having sex with a farm animal, and don’t get this author started on the behavior of the new aerobic exercise instructor. Hence, as crazy and silly as it is, *Club Dread* still attempts to chart a moral world for its characters to inhabit, even though they aren’t, strictly speaking, moral people. Perhaps that’s the point of this 21st-century return to old tropes. No one in 2004 would pass the smell test for morality if life were a slasher film.

Other slasher paradigm elements can also be found here. The “tour of the dead,” in which characters find, posed by the killer, the bodies of their friends, is a doozy here. There’s a party here at a straw hut, and all the partygoers are dead. Spinning on a record turntable is a severed head. The film’s coup-de-grace, set on a boat, goes way over the top in terms of gore. The murderer keeps coming back for more, even while literally being utterly ripped apart.

Although Bill Paxton is endlessly amusing as the “mellow island songster,” some of the other characters in the film are not as well-drawn, which makes both the horror and comedy fall flat at times. For every quirky touch, such as a scene in a hedge maze set to the sound effects of the 80s arcade game, Pac Man, there’s another moment that doesn’t actually capture the right tone. For every off-kilter reference, such as M.C. Gainey’s character playing a variation on Robert Shaw’s Quint from *Jaws*, there’s another moment that just plays as superficial or shallow.

But the film’s visual ingenuity is often remarkable. Take the scene in which one would-be-victim attempts to escape the killer in a golf-car going two miles an hour. The killer just walks up beside the

slow-moving cart as it (fails) to speed away.

But ultimately, the film can't thread one very specific needle. The movie is about shallow, beautiful people who do bad things, and the movie is aware they are both beautiful and shallow. But it never makes the audience care about those folks enough that the horror takes on any real dimension or sense of gravitas. A comedy-horror film is one in which comedy comes first, horror second. A horror comedy is the opposite, and it seems as though, judging by the bloodletting, the filmmakers were going for that here.

It's a tough balance, and *Club Dread* just barely misses the mark. This is one club that you won't want to join as a (dis?)-member.

Darkness ★ ★

Critical Reception

"*Darkness* does actually pick up somewhat in its final reel, when the family's imploding dynamics begin to work in tandem with the supernatural forces terrorizing them. During these scenes, you begin to glimpse the film Mr. Balaguero perhaps intended: A grim portrait of a disintegrating family unit, in which no member can be trusted and no one can hang onto their identity. But it's too little, too late—a minor blip of interest in an otherwise wan retread of better horror flicks past."—Bilge Ebiri, *The New York Daily Sun*: "Breaking Ground," December 24, 2004.

"Ultimately, what is most annoying about *Darkness* is its lack of substance as a screenplay. There is a sense that it has been thrown together as a collusion of horror clichés without much *raison d'être*—there are ghosts in the shadows, the House With a Sinister Past, the conspiring occult cabal, the father descending into madness possibly as a result of the malign influence of the house a la *The Amityville Horror* (1979). However, there is not much sense to any of it."—Richard Scheib, *Moria: Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy Film Review*, last retrieved August 27, 2020.

"Balaguero borrows shamelessly from *The Shining* and *The Exorcist III* while cannibalizing his own earlier work for ideas, and the shaking, quaking camera work by Xavi Gimenez (who later shot the magnificently gloomy *Machinist* for Brad Anderson) and the film's recurring scare tactic—a dark figure racing across the screen accompanied by a jarring jolt on the soundtrack—are used ad nauseam. All of this, of course, would be forgivable if it added up to a scary movie or made even a lick of sense (chunks appear to have been cut out of a longer cut of the film), but Balaguero manages to disappoint on every possible front."—Ken Fox, *TV Guide*, last retrieved August 27, 2020.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Anna Paquin (Regina); Lena Olin (Maria); Iain Glen (Mark); Giancarlo Giannini (Albert Rua); Fele Martínez (Carlos); Stephan Enquist (Paul); Fermi Reixach (Villalobos); Francesc Pages (Drive Traffic Jam); Craig Stevenson (Electrician).

CREW: Buena Vista Home Video, Castelao Producciones, Dimension Films, Filmmax International and Via Digital presents *Darkness*. Casting: Elena Arnao, Matt Western. Costume Designer: Eva Arretxe. Production Designer: Llorenç Miquel. Music: Carles Cases. Director of Photography: Xavi Gimenez. Film Editor: Luis de la Madrid. Producer: Julio Fernandez. Executive Producers: Carlos Fernandez, Guy J. Louthan, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. Written by: Jaume Balaguero, Fernando de Felipe. Directed by: Jaume Balagueró M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A family moves into an old home in Spain. The patriarch, Paul (Glen), however, suffers a seizure and learns that it is related to Huntington's Disease, a malady that causes death to brain cells and results in dangerous dementia. As his wife, Maria (Olin), struggles to contend with her husband's sickness, she must also cope with apparent supernatural happenings in the house. Her children, Regina (Paquin) and Carlos (Martinez), are in real jeopardy there, in part because the house, given to the family by Paul's father, Albert (Giannini), was constructed for use in a Satanic ritual forty years earlier, one

involving an eclipse and the sacrifice of children. Now, another eclipse is slated to occur, and the Satanic ritual—which involves the sacrifice of seven innocents—can finally be completed.

COMMENTARY: Before he gave the world the brilliant and harrowing *REC* in 2007, director Jaume Balagueró was behind this considerably-less-than-successful supernatural horror film starring Lena Olin and Anna Paquin. *Darkness* is a slow-moving, muddled mess of a film. The characters are all remote and unlikeable and the film feels interminable, though it runs only 102 minutes. Finally, the hopelessly dark ending, the final eclipse of evil over good, is the nail in the coffin. One feels, after watching the characters struggle incessantly with one another for an hour-and-a-half, that the film's destination is not worth the journey, or the time put in. This ennui may be the result of the fact that the film features few surprises and tracks pretty much how one expects.

It's clear that, like *Session 9* (2001), *Darkness* uses Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) as a major source of inspiration. The title cards between scenes in the film, counting the weeks spent in the house, mirror the interstitial titles in the Kubrick classic, for example. More dramatically both films involve the disintegration of a family unit. In this case, there are two bad fathers to contend with. Giannini's Albert is the true bad father, a Satanic cultist who has engineered the downfall of his progeny. Albert is so dislikable that he was not able to complete the ritual forty years ago because he didn't love his son. For the ritual to work, love had to be on the plate, and it wasn't. The second bad father is Paul, a man impeded, through no fault of his own, by a degenerative illness. Still, even though he is not responsible for his sickness, the result is the same: Paul's family cannot count on his support or loyalty when the supernatural crisis hits.

The film's major problem may be in its (unintentional?) depiction of a bad mother, Olin's Maria. She is dismissive and nasty throughout the film, and treats her daughter, Regina, with great disrespect. Maria has no time for her daughter, it seems, and when the supernatural shit hits the fan, it is too late to save anyone. But the lack of an adult protagonist seems to doom this family from the start. At least Danny had his Mom, Wendy (Shelley Duvall), in *The Shining*. Here, Regina and Carlos are on their own, navigating a hostile, malicious adult world. It's no surprise that, at film's end, they are now servants of the Devil.

The synopsis at the start of this review condenses the film's plot down into a few sentences, and in doing so, likely makes the film appear far more coherent than it actually is. *Darkness* meanders about and doesn't hold together in a way that would give the narrative gravitas, or that would, frankly, keep the viewer's attentions focused. There are flashbacks, ominously intoned warnings ("*It started again...*"), scenes of domestic discontent, and instances of apparent supernatural events, like pencils belonging to Carlos continuing, of their own volition, to roll under his bed. There are ghost children about, plus cultists, and dark conspiracies. There is teenage angst.

And none of it, seems tightly connected, or frankly, shot in a way that makes it intrinsically interesting.

Balagueró made a film this decade, *REC*, of blazing, singular intensity and power. That great film demonstrates how this director can marshal all a film's ingredients and resources into an immersive, terrorizing whole. *Darkness* is the anti-*REC*. It wants to be the cold, clinical, distancing family apocalypse that *The Shining* portrayed, but doesn't have the patience or the vision to achieve the same impact. Most importantly, it doesn't have Wendy Torrance, or a character her equal.

When fighting a war with the supernatural you don't get to fight, one supposes, with the Mom you want, but with the Mom you have, to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, but *Darkness* doesn't give the audience a matriarch it can root for, at least before it is too late.

Dawn of the Dead * * * *

"Man, that is some crazy opening. None of that old-fashioned set-up or pesky back-story context-building for these folks. *Dawn of the Dead* just hurls itself at you, eyes bloodshot, decaying flesh dripping from its mouth and dives straight for the throat. Fight or flight, baby; it's all you can do to stay in your seat and just take it. The first 10 minutes of this explosive rethink of George Romero's classic motorvates with such force, such terrifying velocity, such ever-accelerating chaos that you're perfectly within your rights to think this is going to be one of the greatest movie-as-overwhelming-juggernaut ever made."—Omar L. Gallega, *Austin-American Statesman*, October 28, 2004.

"Snyder's pacing is rapid-fire, as the zombies move fast and thick. (Credit *28 Days Later* for killing the notion of slow-moving zombies forever.) Snyder mounts horror scenes that are genuinely surprising and, thanks to David Leroy Anderson's makeup effects, creatively gory. The script by James Gunn, who wrote both *Scooby Doo* movies and the Troma Films hit *Tromeo and Juliet*, is laced with dark humor—like the game Kenneth and a rooftop survivor (Bruce Bohne) play of shooting zombies who look like celebrities. Snyder and Gunn also are respectful of Romero's original to the point of casting actors from the first film (including actor-director-effects wizard Tom Savini) in cameos."—Sean P. Means, *The Salt Lake Tribune*: "*Dawn of the Dead* revival is a tasty morsel of horror," March 19, 2004.

"It was probably inevitable that someone was going to remake what is very possibly the gold standard for zombie films, and as far as remakes go, this could have been far, far worse than it was. Yes, it commits some fairly heinous sins for Romero-philes—most notably fast-moving zombies, and surprisingly, a few too many survivors lurking in the mall, perhaps, but there are some ideas, like the man living on the roof of a gun store facing the mall, that are inspired, and help move this film above the vast majority of rip-offs out there in the wild.

While the speed is a sin, it's the fast-moving initial fifteen minutes of the film that establish a tone that tells you this is not your Uncle George's zombie film. There are some very good performances by Ving Rhames and Sarah Polley in the film and it's interesting to note that this is Zack Snyder's directorial debut (yes, that Zack Snyder) with a script credited to James Gunn (yes, that James Gunn). It's an entertaining film and one that plays with some new ideas (zombie babies were an inevitability in this genre) rather than just retreading things that have gone before.

There are some remakes out there (*The Fly*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The Thing* come to mind) that took their predecessors to new levels. This film does not do the same to Romero's original. Remember the pies in the face gag from Romero's film that felt a little out of place if you weren't in on the joke? This remake feels a lot like that. It lacks the subtlety that made the original such a special film. Romero's film wasn't really talking about zombies so much as it was pointing out the lifelessness of the survivors in the mall (given all that you could ever want, there's nothing left to live for). This remake loses that—there's not much of a message here, even if it can tug on our heartstrings from time to time. The selfishness that was the 1990s is reflected here in the new millennium's remake, but I think this version went for fun rather than depth."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

"If it's possible, the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* projects a far nihilistic view of the world's end than even George Romero's 1979 classic. DC Comic director Zack Snyder's vision paints a gory and uncompromising end for the thinking man, a species replaced by its own people in a rabid state, lacking any soul. But it's the quality performances from stars that refuse to perform as if they're in schlock that raises this remake to the level of modern horror classic.

The opening scene, which forebears the nightmare to come while the heroine Sarah Polley obliviously goes about her daily chores, makes the reveal that normality has died all the more horrific.

The sequence of the protagonists playing about in the mall to the parody tune of Richard Cheese's 'Down With The Sickness' gives me life and when I die, I want that song played at my funeral on loop."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Sarah Polley (Ana); Ving Rhames (Kenneth); Jake Weber (Michael); Mekhi Phifer (Andre); Ty Burrell (Steve); Michael Kelly (CJ); Kevin Zegers (Terry); Michael Barry (Bart); Lindy Booth (Nicole); Jayne Eastwood (Norma); Boyd Banks (Tucker); Inna Korobkina (Lucia); R.D. Reid (Glen); Kim Poirer (Monica); Matt Frewer (Frank); Justin Louis (Luis); Hannah Lochner (Vivian); Bruce Bohne (Andy); Scott Reiniger (The General); Tom Savini (County Sheriff); Ken Foree (Televangelist).

CREW: Universal Studios, Strike Entertainment, New Amsterdam Entertainment, Metropolitan Filmexport and Toho-Towa present *Dawn of the Dead*. Casting: Joseph Middleton. Production Designer: Andrew

Neskoromny. Costume Designer: Denise Cronenberg. Special Effects: Music: Tyler Bates. Director of Photography: Matthew F. Leonetti. Film Editor: Niven Howie. Producers: Marc Abraham, Eric Newman, Richard P. Rubinstein. Executive Producers: Armyan Bernstein, Thomas A. Bliss, Dennis E. Jones. Based on the screenplay by: George a. Romero. Written by: James Gunn. Directed by: Zack Snyder. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A nurse, Ana (Polley), gets off duty after a busy shift, goes home to her loving husband, and falls asleep, like she would on any normal day. But this is not a normal day. Ana awakes to blood-curdling terror as her husband is killed, and the zombie apocalypse begins. Ana flees her neighborhood, and joins up with a tough police officer, Kenneth (Rhames), Michael (Weber), a criminal, Andre (Phifer), and his very pregnant wife, Luda (Korabkina). Desperate for sanctuary, they hide in Crossroads Mall, but meet up with a Mall security team led by C.J. (Kelly). An uneasy peace is forged, but the zombies are gathering outside the mall, and the end of the world is nigh.

COMMENTARY: More than fifteen years after its theatrical release, Zack Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* is widely regarded as a remake that doesn't suck.

There's no reason to quibble with that assessment.

This remake is successful to such a degree because it adapts basic settings, lines of dialogue and the general premise of George A. Romero's 1978 masterpiece, but then spins these elements in a new and original direction. Importantly, Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* does not feature the same main characters undertaking the same horrific adventure.



Ana (Sarah Polley) and Kenneth (Ving Rhames) brace for the zombie apocalypse in the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004).

This change leaves room for the remake to prosper; to create new personalities, and to explore different aspects of the zombie apocalypse. This film could actually be considered a “side-quel” as much as a remake if not for a few significant changes in the zombie nature, and mode of zombie virus transmission. The memory of the original *Dawn of the Dead* is honored with some well-placed in-jokes (like the department store named Gaylen Ross), and brief cameos from original stars Scott Reineger, Tom Savini, and Ken Foree but the central occupation of this film is neither fan service, nor homage. Instead, Snyder updates the zombie formula with scenes of epic, spectacular destruction, and frenetic, bone-jangling action scenes. Such jaw-dropping moments would not function adequately, however, if the characters did not matter. Fortunately, they do. *Dawn of the Dead* adopts from Romero its focus on people, on human beings, and the diverse responses to crisis that different people might legitimately have during an absolute breakdown of society.

This movie concerns, more anything else, questions about how people define morality in times of chaos. When is the right time to kill someone who might be a threat? When is the right time to realize that you, too, represent a similar threat?

Culturally speaking, this is not a small issue.

In 2003, an America still grieving after 9/11 launched a pre-emptive war against Iraq because that foreign country could one day metastasize as a threat to our nation. Similarly, today, there are those in our country who want to wage a similar war against Iran on the possibility of what might, one day, be a threat. It is abundantly true that this *Dawn of the Dead* does not satirize conspicuous consumption, the social preoccupation of Romero’s Carter-Era work of art. Yet that fact, does not mean it is devoid of commentary on humanity. In the immediate post-9/11 age, when Iraq was starting to turn towards chaos, this *Dawn of the Dead* could have focused on many ideas roiling the culture. But what Snyder’s remake concerns most deeply is the idea that people don’t remain “human” if they surrender their morality for the possibility of security, if they see in other people only eventual threats to our own survival. This *Dawn of the Dead* makes note that in a real crisis (forecasting Hurricane Katrina, to some extent), the U.S. government and/or military simply can’t come to the rescue for everyone, and many people will have to rely on their own abilities, and relationships, to survive the dawn.

Here, one character, C.J., notes that “America always sorts its shit out.” But that bumper sticker slogan falls by the wayside when rescue helicopters don’t come to the rescue, but just fly on past the mall. As the film’s characters reckon with the fact that their previous lifestyle can no longer be sustained — “I wanted a mocha latte with cream!” complains one character—a new order must be erected from the ruins of the old. The problem, of course, is that the zombies represent a competing social order, and one of numerical superiority. None of these points are lingered on to the exclusion of thrills or entertainment, and this version of *Dawn of the Dead* succeeds admirably on the basis of its characters, for its dramatic twists and turns, and for its dedication to scaring the audience silly. There are some good horror remakes out there. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), *The Thing* (1982), *The Fly* (1986), and *The Blob* (1988) jump to mind. *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) earns a slot on that list.

In some ways, the most significant character in *Dawn of the Dead* is Michael, played by Jake Weber. He is an average joe. He’s worked a lot of jobs, been married, and is generally a reasonable fellow. He prefers building consensus. He doesn’t like confrontation. But when injured people arrive at the mall requiring medical aid, Michael changes from wanting to help others to wanting to immediately kill Frank (Frewer), a man who will, because of a bite, eventually become a zombie. For the moment, Frank is fine, however. He is a father to Nicole (Lindy Booth), and wholly reasonable. He doesn’t want to be a danger to anyone. Yet Michael decides, preemptively, that he must be killed, and furthermore killed *right now*.

On one hand, his viewpoint seems reasonable. Infection always ends in zombification—no exceptions. Frank *will* be a threat and will attempt to kill the survivors. On the other hand, to preemptively kill a human being—one with feelings, relationships, and a soul—on the basis entirely of *future* danger, is representative of a kind of harsh, bunker mentality. Precautions can be taken instead. Frank can be contained, and pre-emptive murder is not actually necessary, or preferable. But when people are afraid, they act out of cowardice and fear. The Bush Doctrine states that America can attack

any country, preemptively, that it decides is a threat. If scared, it reserves the right to act out of that fear, and not from fact, or reason.

Indeed, this is what occurs in the film. Frank is given his life, and Kenneth watches over him, in a locked mall shop, as death comes. Because of this, Frank is given the opportunity to say a tender farewell to his daughter. Something good came out of something bad. Later in the film, Michael is himself bitten by a zombie in a heart-wrenching scene and realizes that he has no place in the future, either. He doesn't travel with the survivors to their destination, a distant island, but rather remains behind to watch "the sunrise." He shoots himself in the head before he can become a monster and imperil those he loves. But the important thing is that in this case, Michael chooses. He makes the choice that, earlier, he would have expressly denied Frank. Nobody pre-emptively kills Michael. No one pre-emptively puts a bullet in his skull. His own choice, though heart-breaking, is respected by the others.

Dawn of the Dead is not specifically about the Iraq War of course. But it is about morality, and the mind-set—the bunker mentality—that permits pre-emptive strikes to be considered a valid option. Even during a zombie apocalypse, the film tells us, we can't make choices based on a possibility of what *might* occur. Why? We're all going to die one day, but in the meantime, we want "*every single second*," as Frank notes, of life, on his deathbed. We want that last sunrise, the very one Michael affords himself.

Andre's subplot also plays into this philosophy, this debate about the morality of a pre-emptive strike. Andre fears that the others will kill Luda and his unborn child, because Luda is infected. So, quite dangerously, he hides the truth from the group. If Andre did not fear the pre-emptive murder of his family, Luda and the pregnancy could have been watched—as Frank was watched—and Andre and Norma (Jayne Eastwood) need not have died. So, Andre's fear of a pre-emptive attack on his wife and unborn child is, actually, the thing that led to so many deaths. Both the group, and Andre himself would have been safer with a policy of containment.

This *Dawn of the Dead* also features a leitmotif about the limits of military power, also an appropriate topic given the quagmire in Iraq, and Bush's failure to get Osama Bin Laden in Tora Bora. Initially, the survivors hold out hope that they will be rescued, and that all will be well. This interruption in their lifestyle is just temporary until the cavalry rides in. Or so they believe. They are disabused of that notion when a rescue helicopter flies by and doesn't even acknowledge their presence. All zombie movies are, in some sense, about the breakdown of infrastructure and an acknowledgment of government, military limits. This *Dawn of the Dead* takes that thought to its logical conclusion, however. In a time of total disaster, there is no rescue. People must fend for themselves because of the scale of the problem.

And *Dawn of the Dead* does a remarkable job exploring the scale of the problem. Snyder has been afforded technology and a budget that Romero never had. He can thus showcase zombie multitudes, the likes of which have never been seen (at least until *World War Z* [2013]). He artfully creates these sweeping long shots revealing the scope of the "invasion," and the damage to neighborhoods and cities. It's a stunning new take on the zombie apocalypse that makes it feel real in visual terms. One of the film's most amazing and resonant shots reveals two trucks in the dark of night, pummeled by an ocean of zombies that extends as far as the camera's range. The film also lingers on long, overhead shots which first show us a satellite's view of normality, and then show us that "normality" turned to utter chaos. This, as written elsewhere in the book, is the *God's Eye Shot*, or view. These visual compositions help the audience see why *Dawn of the Dead* benefits from a remake. Horror movies of this type can now depict an apocalypse with frightening reality; terms that the low-budget Romero films simply can't compete with. That doesn't mean that the classic films aren't great, only that the 21st century gives filmmakers the opportunity to take on the zombie apocalypse from a fresh perspective. An update is warranted, because filmmakers have realized a new way the story can be told.

In the 2000s, there was a debate among horror aficionados about "slow" zombies vs. "fast" zombies. Who's the winner?

It matters not a whit.

With the right director at the helm, zombies can be terrifying in either mode, and the zombie

hordes in this move fit the bill. But all of *Dawn of the Dead*'s remarkable visuals would not mean a thing if the drama among the characters did not work so well. These particular characters are very 2004 in a way, divided by the press and politicians in their beliefs on about every hot-button topic in American life. Still, they are willing—finally—to put all that nonsense away for the common good. The TV evangelist played by Foree attempts to take wedge issues—abortion, gay marriage and so forth—and use them to divide people. The zombie apocalypse is God's punishment for those "evils," and so forth. He is a stand in for the media, organized religion, and the political campaigns of the day.

Yet the films' characters don't stay divided for long, despite racial, ethnic, and even sexual orientation differences. One great aspect of the film is the manner in which the C.J. character develops. He begins as an obnoxious, condescending asshole—a kind of stand-in for *Night of the Living Dead*'s (1968) Mr. Cooper—but eventually he gets on board with the program, joins the community, and proves himself a courageous and even noble fighter. In real life I probably wouldn't like C.J. at first, either, but by the film's end, I was hoping and praying he would survive the crisis. The filmmakers made him more than a redneck stereotype, and so, in the end, we root for him.

Similarly, Michael goes from being reasonable to unreasonable to reasonable again, in a very realistic, very human way. For a while, his fear gets the better of him. There are few of us for whom that wouldn't be the case, considering the circumstances. The only truly cardboard character in the film is Steve Marcus (Ty Burrell), a guy who doesn't realize that the old order is shattered, and that he has to live in a new way. He is rich, indulged, entitled and obnoxious, and he can't ever seem to get over his belief that, as the 1 percent, he's the most important person in the room.

Or any room.

The only aspect that diminishes *Dawn of the Dead* is the post-credits sequence, which reveals the group's catastrophic arrival at the island. It is not necessary to see this zombie attack, when it could have been left entirely to our imagination what happened to Ana, Kenneth, Terry, and Nicole. It's true that *Night of the Living Dead* features an absolutely cynical ending, with the death of Ben, so it is possible to interpret this *Dawn*'s ending as being in tune with the Romero aesthetic. I don't object to the fact that these characters might die; I do object to the fact that the film feels it needs to show us what happens. The important aspect of the narrative is life in the mall, and the escape from the mall ... the hope for something better out there. As in life, there may be nothing better out there, but again, that idea doesn't need to be made concrete. I would have rather been left wondering about the fates of the characters of *Dawn of the Dead* than spoon-fed the answer about the end of the world, and the presence of the zombies on that island.

Dead End (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Ray Wise (Frank Harrington); Lin Shaye (Laura Harrington); Mick Cain (Richard Harrington); Alexandra Holden (Marion Harrington); Billy Asher (Brad Miller); Amber Smith (Lady in White); Karen S. Gregan (Doctor); Sharron Madden (Nurse); Steve Valentine (Man in Black); Jimmy Skaggs (Worker #1); Clement Blake (Worker #2).

CREW: Lions Gate Films, Sagittaire Films and Captain Movies present, *Dead End*. Casting: Amanda Koblin. Production Designer: Bryce Houlthousen. Costume Designer: Deborah Waknin. Special Effects: Éclair Numerique. Music: Greg De Belles. Director of Photography: Alexander Buono. Film Editor: Antoine Varelle. Producers: Sonja Shillito, Gabriella Stollenwerck, Cecile Terlman. Executive Producer: Yves Chavalier. Written and Directed by: Jean-Baptiste Andrea, Fabrice Canepa. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On Christmas Eve, the bickering Harrington family takes a road trip to visit distant relatives for the holiday. The family is almost in a car wreck after the patriarch, Frank (Wise), falls asleep at the wheel. Later, he takes what he believes is a short cut on an isolated, wooded road, but it seems to

go forever. As they traverse the seemingly endless back road, the family, including wife Laura (Shaye) and children Richard (Cain) and daughter (Marion), as well as her fiancé, Brad (Asher), encounter a lady in white (Smith) holding a dead baby. The family attempts to help her but is soon stalked on the isolated road by a strange black car. Before long, that black car begins taking members of the Harrington family, leaving the survivors to wonder what has really happened to them, and where they truly are.

COMMENTARY: A monster hit on the DVD circuit, *Dead End* is a lovely little grace note, like *Wendigo* (2000), in a decade dominated by prequels, remakes, reboots, and sequels. Instead of focusing on building a series of films, *Dead End* sticks to its guns and depicts a quirky and disturbing narrative of family dysfunction, existential horror, and moral consequences. The film is weird and low-budget, yet oddly effective too, since its rhythms don't feel like Hollywood's business-as-usual. With good—if strange—performances from Ray Wise and Lin Shaye, this is a road-trip-gone-wrong movie that proves genuinely haunting.

Dead End concerns a middle-class family, the Harringtons, that is rife with dysfunction. Although they won't admit it, Dad has had an affair with his secretary. Mom, meanwhile, self-medicates with prescription drugs, and pines for a man she loved, rather than the man she settled for. Marion seems to be making the same mistakes. She is pregnant with the child of a fiancé she doesn't really love. And her brother, Richard, smokes pot because he can't handle life. His mother disapproves of his drug use and tells him, hypocritically that her pills are “legal.” This is a portrait of American life in the 2000s, the movie indicates. Unhappiness isn't rectified, merely numbed by drugs, and the old conventions of monogamous marriage don't seem to serve the young or the old anymore. The family is a hotbed of resentment, and pathology, yet it is in the same car together, on the same, long road, *Dead End* suggests.

That road, clearly, is the film's metaphor for existence. It goes on and on, and feels never-ending, and like a trap, at least until all the people inside the same car begin to reckon with each other, and their behavior towards one another. There are many “God's Eye” shots of the solitary car, on the never-ending road, in *Dead End*, and the shot is perfect for the film's rhetoric about a moral universe. Recall that the God's Eye Shot is one in which the camera adopts the viewpoint from high above ground level, usually several hundred feet in the sky. It gazes straight down to the Earth, so that any observed object is tiny, and insignificant. The high-angle shot has long been a signifier of isolation, entrapment, and doom in terms of film grammar, but the God's Eye Shot takes this idea degrees further. It suggests not just isolation, entrapment and doom, but the insignificance of man's affairs, and even the presence of something else, a force, watching mankind. In films such as *The Mothman Prophecies* and *Dead End*, the God's Eye Shot suggests both that we are small, and that there are other, larger forces at work in the cosmos.

Dead End boasts some ideas in common with *Carnival of Souls* (1962) but has an entirely different atmosphere or vibe because of the focus on a family unit, rather than an individual who faces their mortality, and the afterlife. By focusing on family, and choices and hurts involving that family, *Dead End* presents a moral paradigm. If we're all on a long road together, in the same car, it seems that we should probably be good to one another, especially those we love. That doesn't mean we are perfect to each other or never hurt each other. It means we should apologize when we do hurt each other. Frank refuses to acknowledge how he has hurt, and broken, his wife, and therefore his children too. Mom refuses to grapple with the real pain she feels and tunes out with drugs. Richard has selected a different drug, but made the same choice, coming down from his highs just long enough to be sarcastic and bitter. And Marion has doubled down on her parents' traditional lifestyle, hoping desperately that it can provide her the happiness that she knows, firsthand, it has never brought to them.

There are clues and symbols presented in *Dead End*, to explain the strange journey that the Harrington family undertakes. All their clocks and watches stop at 7:30 p.m., for example. Although one character brings up missing time and notes that “*This reeks of alien activity*” the solution is much simpler, and more elegant. As is, finally, the name of their deliverance, a road they seek named “*Marcotti*,” which is not found on any map. Some may recognize the latter element as a *Twilight Zone*

(1959–1964) plot element, from the episode “A Stop at Willoughby,” but it nonetheless makes sense. The Harringtons have crossed over to a point in which their suffering and mutual hurts are no longer the point. It is their existence, and their spirits’ destination, that becomes the paramount concern. The black car on the road that stalks them is a terrifying symbol, both of death, and a place of moral culpability for the wrongs they have committed.

Dead End features a small cast, one location—a road that never seems to end—and yet approaches the big questions of human existence in the 2000s and beyond. It reminds the viewer that the road may not last forever, so it’s good to be nice to the people who share it with you.

*Dracula 3000 (DTV) 1/2 * (half-a-star)*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Casper Van Dien (Captain Abraham Van Helsing); Erika Eleniak (Aurora Ash); Coolio (187); Alexandra Kamp (Mina Murry); Grant Swanby (Arthur “The Professor” Holmwood); Langley-Kirkwood (Orlock); Tiny Lister (Humvee); Udo Kier (Captain Varna).

CREW: Film Afrika Worldwide, ApolloProMedia GmbH & Co 1, FilmProduktion KG, and Fiction Film and Television Limited present *Dracula 3000*. Casting: Julia Verdin. Production Designer: Jonathan Hely-Hutchinson. Costume Designer: Wolfgang Ender. Special Effects: Roly Jansen, Cordell McQueen. Music: Michael Hoenig. Director of Photography: Giulio Biccari. Film Editors: Avril Beukes, Ronelle Loots. Producers: Frank Hubner, Brad Krevoy, David Lancaster, David Wicht. Written by: Ivan Millborrow, Darrell Roodt. Directed by: Darrell Roodt. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the year 2987, Captain Abraham Van Helsing (Van Dien) of the salvage spaceship *Mother III* encounters the long-missing ship, *Demeter*, adrift in the Carpathian Galaxy. They learn from the log of the *Demeter*’s Captain, Varna (Kier), of the disaster that befell the ship. Soon the same disaster threatens Van Helsing’s ship: a revived Count Dracula.

COMMENTARY: *Dracula 3000* is a strong contender, along with *Mr. Jingles*, for worst horror film of the 2000s. This disastrously bad film features terrible production values, and a script which thinks it is clever by transplanting names from Bram Stoker’s famous novel into a futuristic setting. The sad thing is that a TV series called *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (1979–1981) vetted an episode called “Space Vampire” in 1980 that covered the same territory and did it better. That was twenty-four years ahead of *Dracula 3000*, and the writing and production values on the old TV show are better than what can be found here. In that story, a derelict spaceship arrives at a space station carrying a being called a “Vorvon,” a space vampire that could only be stopped by intense bright light. Buck Rogers (Gil Gerard) finally killed it by making sure it would fly (a remote controlled) ship into the sun. *Dracula 3000* also features a space vampire, here named Orlock, and it is finally killed by, again, blowing up on the way to a star.

As was the case in *Dracula 2000*, there is something of a disconnect in how the Dracula legend/story is parsed in this film. For instance, Van Helsing learns that vampires are real, and that he traces his lineage back to the Victorian Age Van Helsing who first defeated Dracula. So, within the universe of this film, the events of the novel are “true,” so-to-speak. How then to explain that the name of the spaceship carrying Dracula is the same name as the sea vessel from the novel, *Demeter*? Coincidence? Or that Orlock is discovered in the “Carpathian” galaxy, when Dracula’s home in the novel, is Transylvania and the Carpathian Mountains. These references are odd, considering that Dracula is supposedly real in this universe.

Dracula 3000’s view of the future is ramshackle, and half thought out. There are some silly

references to other space productions, such as the moment when a character notes that the crew spends half its time “*lost in space*.” At another juncture, a character remarks that even the “*hand phasers*” are malfunctioning. Phasers, of course, are *Star Trek*-specific tech. At one point, a female android shows up, recalling the female android in *Jason X*. This film makes that *Friday the 13th* entry look like *2001: A Space Odyssey* in comparison,

But the worst insult here is the portrayal of Dracula himself. Instead of being an exotic-looking specimen of great danger and compelling mystery, he is played by an actor who looks and acts like a 40-year-old accountant from the American mid-west. There is nothing exotic, interesting, or the slightest bit frightening about this guy.

And did I mention the dialogue?

The movie is rife with penis jokes, and racist penis jokes too. And then, one character actually states, regarding Dracula, “*He wants to kill her, but I believe he wants to titty-fuck her first.*”

After 75 years in the cinematic pop culture, the good count has come to this.

But the one line of dialogue that may be most pertinent to this film comes when a spaceship crewman urges one of his compatriots, “how about showing some respect for the dead?”

To paraphrase, how about showing some respect for your source material?

Exorcist: The Beginning ★ ★

Critical Reception

“There is no standard horror movie schtick that Harlin can’t yank with a stomach-twisting tug. Instead of turning up the mental shock therapy, he goes for the gore. Between scenes combining swarms of flies, coagulated blood, hungry maggots and the like, this director spring-loads one ‘Boo!’ moment after another. Things are always jumping out at you from deep shadows, usually as minor chords moan and swell in the background. There is a refreshing lack of computerized effects until we get to the final confrontation between defrocked Father Merrin and the most distilled form of pure evil mere mortals can imagine.”—Chuck Graham, *Tucson Citizen*, August 21, 2004, page D1.

“While it never approaches the stratospheric badness of John Boorman’s *Exorcist II: The Heretic*—perhaps the worst follow-up to a stellar film in cinema history—Harlin’s lemon does its damndest to heap more dirt on the franchise’s grave.”—Nick Schager, *Slant Magazine*, May 25, 2004.

“This is the Renny Harlin version of the Paul Schrader film that wisely forgets everything we learned about Lankester Merrin from *Exorcist II: The Heretic* and then foolishly gives us a fairly terrible film in its place. To its credit, Stellan Skarsgård is perfectly cast—you can believe that this is a younger version of Max von Sydow. Skarsgård is good in both versions of this film, for what that’s worth. Putting an action director in charge of an *Exorcist* film was a bad idea from the beginning—but Harlin wasn’t the director from the beginning (Paul Schrader was)—one can only imagine the studio notes that Harlin was handed when he went to work. Both versions of the film have similar beats—a church buried in the desert, hiding something evil within, while Lankester Merrin is forced to deal with some memories of World War II that are his evil within. Beyond that, we have different characters, different events, and in Harlin’s version, there is less exorcism and more exposition-laden dialogue trying to establish something like a mythology.

In an alternate universe, this film is a prequel to John Carpenter’s *Prince of Darkness* where something evil is basically hidden in the basement of a church. Unfortunately, we don’t live in that universe.

Having seen both versions of this film (and you kind of need to see both, I suppose), there’s nothing about Harlin’s version that is superior to Schrader’s, but Schrader’s film is only mildly superior to Harlin’s. This is one of those films that would have been better left unmade. And one wishes that the Producers could have counted their losses at the Schrader stage and just skipped the Harlin version—apologies in advance, but what possessed them? Save your time and go re-watch Blatty’s *Exorcist III*.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Stellan Skarsgård (Father Merrin); Izabella Scorupco (Sarah); James D’Arcy (Father Francis); Remy

Sweeney (Joseph); Julian Wadham (Major Granville); Andrew French (Chuma); Ralph Brown (Sergeant Major); Ben Cross (Semelier); David Bradley (Father Gionetti); Alan Ford (Jefferies); Antonie Kamerling (Lieutenant Kessel); Eddie Osei (Emekwi); Israel Aduramo (Jomo); Patrick O'Kane (Bession); James Bellamy (James).

CREW: Warner Bros., Morgan Creek Entertainment and Dominion Entertainment present *Exorcist: The Beginning*. Casting: Pam Dixon. Costume Designer: Luke Reichle. Production Designer: Stefano Ortolani. Music: Trevor Rabin. Special Effects: Two Hours in the Dark, Radish, Elements Studios, Pixel Magic, Meteor Studios, Digital Dimension Entertainment Group. Director of Photography: Vittorio Storaro. Film Editors: Mark Goldblatt, Todd E. Miller. Producer: James G. Robinson. Executive Producers: Guy McElwaine, David C. Robinson. Based on the movie *The Exorcist*. Written by: William Peter Blatty. Story by: William Wisner and Caleb Carr. Written by: Alexi Hawley. Directed by: Renny Harlin. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 114 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the late 1940s a dissolute Father Merrin (Skarsgård) has lost his faith, following an incident in World War II involving Nazi soldiers. In Cairo, the priest-turned-archaeologist is approached by a man named Semelier (Cross) about recovering a relic involving a Sumerian Demon. In taking the job, Merrin learns of a new discovery in the desert: a mysterious Christian church apparently built in the 5th century AD, in a location the Byzantine Empire never reached. Upon exploration of the half-buried church, Merrin learns that it is a temple to Lucifer. Inside is a painting of Lucifer, his weapons pointing downward towards Hell. As Merrin grows close to a concentration camp survivor and physician, Sarah (Scorupco), he also contends with the possibility that the discovery of the church has freed an ancient and diabolical evil.

COMMENTARY: The decade of the 2000s gave the world two sub-par *Exorcist* prequels. The first was a reserved, stately, intellectually abstract and symbolic but incredibly dull and meandering effort from esteemed director Paul Schrader called *Dominion*. When the studio saw what Schrader hath wrought, executives realized it was not a mainstream horror film at all and hired Renny Harlin to finish the project in a manner more suitable to expectations and the lineage of the series. Ultimately, the script was re-written, roles were re-cast and new sequences were shot. Harlin's film, *Exorcist: The Beginning*, was the version that got wide release, and which quickly drew multitudinous brickbats from critics and audiences alike. This led to the release of Schrader's version, *Dominion*, which was, by and large, not better received.

Bush or Kerry? Douchebag or Shit Sandwich (per *South Park*)? *Exorcist: The Beginning* or *Dominion*?

No matter who wins, we lose.

But the subject of this review is Renny Harlin's version of the *Exorcist* material, the so-called *The Beginning*. It's strange to write it, but in the final analysis it is no better and no worse, really, than Schrader's version. The two films are similar but feature very different strengths and weaknesses. Where Schrader's version is slow and filled with sub-plots of mild interest that go nowhere, Harlin's version is lively, better focused, and far more action-packed. Where Schrader's version is a thoughtful meditation on human morality and free will, Harlin satisfies mainstream expectations with jump scares and special effects. Harlin's version is less contemplative and pensive, and therefore less cerebral than Schrader's version, but at least you won't be lulled to sleep by it.

What to do both films share?

Stellan Skarsgård.

And some truly horrendous CGI special effects.

Dominion in many ways meditates on an issue of importance in the world. Merrin lives under the occupation of the Nazis as that film opens and is subject to the occupying force's cruelty. On the archaeological dig at the temple, sometime later, he comes to see the British occupation in the same light as the earlier Nazi occupation. It isn't difficult to extrapolate this material to the then-ongoing occupation of Iraq by American forces in the War on Terror. Schrader clearly had the idea on his mind,

and saw how it repeated through history, right up to the present moment. Harlin's effort eliminates or at least reduces the vast majority of this cerebral material, and gives Merrin a would-be romantic interest in Scorupco's Sarah instead. Although this addition may sound dumb or pandering, Sarah's subplot actually gets at the idea of human evil in a way that doesn't require re-staging identical scenes (with different nationalities as the offending occupiers). She tells a story about surviving a concentration camp, and the fact that her husband never touched her after her incarceration, after he learned what the Nazis did to her. This scene is touching, tragic, and makes a point in a less sledge-hammer style.

Harlin's film also better suits the expectations for an *Exorcist* film in other ways. The lighting scheme is far superior. The underneath of the Luciferian temple here is shadowy and dark, a truly frightening place, not the well-lit, daylight affair seen in *Dominion*. The entire last act of *Dominion* has also been changed in *The Beginning* to omit the boy who becomes possessed, and given how poorly that scene plays in *Dominion*, it would be difficult to quibble with the choice to remove it. Harlin is not a director known for subtlety, but *The Beginning* is far from an embarrassment. It's not a great, or even good film, but it is more closely aligned with the expectations surrounding the franchise.

So again, the viewer has a choice. What does he or she want from an *Exorcist* film?

A film that goes delivers a high-minded meditation on the nature of humanity, and good or evil? Or a straightforward horror film that features the familiar tropes of the franchise? Either selection (not unlike Bush vs. Kerry) feels a bit like a devil's bargain. Neither *Dominion* nor *The Beginning* come close to reaching Friedkin's *The Exorcist* in either scares or smarts. These films also fail to achieve an *Exorcist* III (1990) level of quality. It's funny, but both *Dominion* and *The Beginning*, for all their differences in tone and approach, do share one very important line of dialogue. "*Sometimes, I think the best view of God is from Hell*," characters state in the efforts of both Paul Schrader and Renny Harlin.

Well, perhaps *The Beginning* and *Dominion*—a view from Hell, if you permit—grant the horror fan the best view of the original *The Exorcist*, which is certainly the "God" in this metaphor. With this prequel, two skilled directors with different viewpoints and interests, failed to do what William Friedkin accomplished his first time out: engage an audience on a visceral and cerebral level at the same time.

*Fear of Clowns (DTV) **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jacky Reres (Lynn Blodgett); Mark Lassise (Shivers the Clown); Carl Randolph (Doctor Bert Tokyo); Frank Lama (Detective Peters); Rick Ganz (Tucker Reid); Ted Taylor (Heston); John Patrick Barry (Officer Patrick); Andrew C. Schneider (Phillip); Lisa Willis Brush (Lisa); Lauren Pellegrino (Amanda Green).

CREW: Marauder Productions presents, in association with Kangas Kahn Films, and Lions Gate Films Home Entertainment, *Fear of Clowns*. Casting: Jane Toppan. Production Designer: J.W. Haige. Special Effects: Paul C. Kangas, Jim Profit, Doug Ulrich. Music: Chad Seiter. Director of Photography: David Mun. Film Editing: Harvey Glatman. Producers: Rick Ganz, John Hess, Kevin Kangas. Executive Producers: Joel and Michelle Baker, Jeff Kipers. Written and Directed by: Kevin Kangas. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 106 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An artist, Lynn Blodgett (Reres), suffers from coulrophobia, a fear of clowns, owing to a traumatic event in her childhood. Now she and her son are being stalked by Shivers the Clown (Lassise), a terrifying specter, who murders her next-door neighbor. Shivers shows up during Lynn's divorce from Dr. Tokyo (Randolph), and she suspects that her husband may be attempting to terrorize her so as to get a better deal in the legal proceedings. The police investigate, however, and learn the truth about Mr. Shivers, a dangerous schizophrenic from a mental hospital.

COMMENTARY: *Fear of Clowns* seems like high art compared to the decade's other prominent clown movie, *Mr. Jingles*. But don't be fooled by the comparison, this is still an absolutely terrible and amateurish film. At nearly two hours in duration, the film is overlong and meandering, and downright interminable. The filmmakers here never learned the crucial purpose of editing: to cut out the bad stuff in-between the good stuff, so that good stuff arrives closer together. So, although the filmmakers occasionally pinpoint some genuinely horrific imagery, it is generally lost in a sea of bad acting, bad writing, and ineffective cinematography.

Fear of Clowns is overloaded with so much plotting that the movie has no apparent through-line or theme. There's an estranged husband, a killer clown, a messy divorce, a police investigation and a childhood trauma to reckon with here, and probably just two of those elements would have created a tighter, more meaningful—and mercifully, shorter—viewing experience. As it stands, there are many scenes of characters standing around talking, explaining things, and a deficit of real action. What's worse is that there is no time in the movie, for any scene to breathe and for the exposition and plotting to stick. The actors would probably pass muster, at least to some degree, if their big moments had been given that time.

Visually, *Fear of Clowns* is a mess too, with violations everywhere of basic filmmaking tenets, like the 180-rule. Now, it is absolutely true that a great filmmaker can break such rules, if a director knows the rules, and boasts a reason for breaking those rules. Here, the reason isn't clear, or understandable.

Like *Mr. Jingles*, this is actually an amateur film, not a professional one. So why did it receive reviews that suggest otherwise, building up false audience hopes? Here's one answer: in the 2000s, the horror blogosphere and web took off in a very exciting and deep way. Non-professional journalists, writers and critics suddenly had a platform—and a big one—to become opinion makers and leaders. Suddenly, they were powerful influencers. Many such writers who became known during this time are wonderful talents, and at the time of this book's writing, have now had long careers on the web, outside the web (writing books), on television, and so forth. So, on one hand the web amplified many terrific and worthwhile voices, who, in a different era would not have been heard, to the deficit of all who love the genre.

At the same time, some horror blogs and the web amplified some not very professional or strong voices, too. And those writers, without any sense or grounding in professionalism, often gave out positive reviews of terrible films, in exchange for access to a filmmaker, or so they could “find” a treasure, and get hits on their sites.

It isn't pretty, but it is true.

In the cold light of day, it is utterly incomprehensible that either *Mr. Jingles* or *Fear of Clowns* would receive positive reviews from any critic with operating faculties. They each fail the lowest thresholds of the genre: clarity, entertainment, and scares. Audiences discovered this the hard way, when they were able to see the films on home video.

The critics who sold such dreck to them likely were not trusted again.

“Have you ever been spanked by a clown?” a character asks in *Fear of Clowns*. Well, between *Mr. Jingles* and *Fear of Clowns*, this author feels spanked twice by clowns.

That's more than enough for one decade. Steer clear of both these films, or at least go in with the understanding that they were made by very enterprising and enthusiastic amateurs, who, while they must have had great spirit and ambition, had no sense of how to craft a worthwhile horror movie. Again, if this film were offered up free on YouTube, that would be a different story. It might be fun to watch and see the filmmakers develop. But people are expected to pay for this amateur movie, and that's a raw deal.

The Forgotten * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“...like a cop show crossed with *Twilight Zone* episode.”—Jay Boyar, *Orlando Sentinel*: “*The Forgotten* is a Thrill Ride for the Mind,” September 24, 2004.

“...this is a movie that earns its suspense and validates its emotions...”—Chris Kaltenbach, *The Sun*: “Forget-Me-Not,” September 24, 2004, page 1D.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Julianne Moore (Telly Paretta); Anthony Edwards (Jim); Dominic West (Ash); Gary Sinise (Dr. Jack Munce); Jessica Hecht (Eliot); Christopher Kovalski (Sam); Linus Roach (Stranger); Alfre Woodard (Anne Pope); Tim Kang (Agent Wong).

CREW: Sony Pictures Entertainment, Revolution Studios, Jinks/Cohen Company and Visual Arts Entertainment present *The Forgotten*. Casting: Margery Simkin. Costume Designer: Cindy Evans. Production Designer: Bill Groom. Music: James Horner. Special Effects: Sony Pictures Imageworks, New Deal Studios, Digital Backlot. Director of Photography: Anastas Michos. Film Editor: Richard Francis Bruce. Producers: Bruce Cohen, Dan Jinks, Joe Roth. Executive Producers: Todd Garner, Steve Nico. Written by: Gerald di Pego. Directed by: Joseph Rubin. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A mother, Telly Paretta (Moore), mourns the loss of her nine-year-old son, Sam, following a plane crash. Before long, however, everyone in Telly's life seems to forget that Sam ever existed at all, even his father (Edwards). Telly befriends another father, Ash (West), whose child, a daughter, also died in the plane crash. Together, the duo begins to suspect a conspiracy, but discovers one of inhuman proportions. Some terrible being, one not of this Earth—or at least this reality—has been using humans as live rats and editing the very nature of human reality. But this alien being has not reckoned on the deep connection and power of the mother-child bond, the very bond that prohibits Telly from ever forgetting her beloved son.

COMMENTARY: The post-9/11 horror cinema features several stories of conspiracies and lies, of creatures not of this Earth controlling our destinies without love, or care, even. *The Mothman Prophecies* (2003) is one such effort, and *The Forgotten* is another.

The Forgotten's narrative very closely mirrors the events of 9/11, at least according to some conspiracy theorists, or rather, "Truthers." The official story of a disaster, a plane crash, in this case, is bullshit, and only a few people recognize the truth is not as the government, or reality, seems to dictate. As Telly digs deeper into this mystery, she finds evidence of a cover-up involving the airline, the NSA, and even her own therapist.

As Telly is stonewalled, given false-narratives, and warned to relent and "*forget about the children*," she becomes convinced that she is living in a world that has gone wrong; one that can't possibly be real. For those who lived through the September 11, 2001, attacks, these emotions are far from alien, and that fact brings us to the "truth," if you will, involving conspiracy theories.

Why do people believe them?

The answer is that conspiracy theories provide order in the universe. They tie up all the loose ends of an assassination, a terrorist attack, or even a birth certificate into a narrative with clear-cut answers. When one believes in a conspiracy, he or she is choosing to deny the inescapable ambiguity of life, and seek comfort in, essentially, a fairy tale that reflects how they *wish* the world to be (ordered and neat), not how it truly is (disordered). Why would someone prefer to believe a horrible story, like, for example, that George W. Bush was in on 9/11, or that Hillary and Bill Clinton ran a Satanic child molestation ring out of a pizzeria in Washington, D.C.?

Simply put, it is easier to believe in evil or bad people, especially if they are from a different political party, than it is to reckon with the notion that you might never learn all the answers about why a loved one died, or why something terrible happened. Conspiracy theories wrap up with a little bow the disordered fancies of real life.

The Forgotten adopts the point of view of a dedicated conspiracy theorist, Telly, and then validates her viewpoint. Virtually alone, she sees through the layers of obfuscation and through the "*official lies*." The government is indeed cooperating with the alien for reasons of "*survival*," and the truth of the matter "*won't fit*" in her "*brain*."

Finally, Telly's vigilance is rewarded. Reality, essentially, rewrites itself to her perspective, and she gets her son back, alive and well.

Before that difficult-to-swallow happy ending, however, *The Forgotten* develops a cloying and intense atmosphere of paranoia and terror as dark, nebulous forces seem to operate around every corner, and in every dark shadow. The film's selection of visuals cleverly enhances the notion of an alien "other" looking down upon humanity, much as we gaze on ants scurrying about in their ant hills, by featuring several over-head camera shots pointing straight down at metropolitan skyscrapers. Similar shots appear in *The Mothman Prophecies*, to much the same effect: to present a "God's Eye" view of humanity as someone, or some "thing" looks down upon our comings and goings.

Where *The Forgotten* seems to go awry and lose plausibility is in its depiction of an all-powerful entity using humanity as lab rats. This is an inhuman force so powerful it can literally rip people off the face of the Earth, a startling visual effect, admittedly. Yet to fool Telly about her son's existence, this omnipotent entity resorts to painting over his previous bedroom walls and their youthful decorations.

If this non-human being can alter reality and move objects through space, why can't it do any better than a fresh coat of paint?

If it can alter memory and reality, then why not change reality and erase the room, as well as the child?

The Forgotten also devolves into total, maudlin schmaltz during the conclusion, as the alien's plans are defeated because Telly's biological, emotional connection to her son is just too strong to overcome. A story about dark forces interfering in our destiny thus transforms into a parable about the indomitable power of a mother's love. That might seem like a harmless re-statement of a powerful and universal bond in human life, but while watching *The Forgotten*, the audience may get an uncomfortable feeling that all too many Moms embrace the twin aspects of Telly's drama: both her love of her son, and her

unnerving belief that only she knows what is real, and true.

The former element is beautiful indeed.

The latter element seems questionable today and has given the world a generation of anti-vaxxers resistant to science and facts because they *just know* that their pet conspiracy theory, whatever that happens to be, is true.

Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning (DTV) * * *

Critical Reception

“For any fans of the series, this was a must-watch just given the title and its basic premise which was ... what exactly? It’s not a practical prequel, it’s in some ways a remake of the first film set in a different time period, it has a serious undercurrent of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ in its DNA. To this viewer, it’s a great opportunity to enjoy the two leads, Katharine Isabelle and Emily Perkins, playing in the same vein of the other two films, with just enough the same, just enough different, to make for an entertaining experience. It’s not quite as good as you hope it will be, unfortunately, and for all of its dramatic departure from the other two films, it’s the safest of the three films, never really going off in any bold new directions. One wonders at the motivation behind this film, given the above, was it really ‘Hey, let’s remake our own movie, with the same stars, set in a different time period, and wouldn’t that be cool?’

Nearly all of the problems here could have been solved with one simple fix—give the two leads different names. At that point, it can be a proper prequel. We still get to enjoy the two leads. I shudder to imagine someone suggesting people would be confused if the stars had different names in the prequel. Regardless, it’s fun seeing a different ride on the same road. But there is a reason this series stopped at three films.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Katharine Isabelle (Ginger); Emily Perkins (Brigitte); Nathaniel Arcand (Hunter); JR Bourne (James); Hugh Dillon (The Reverend Gilbert); Sadrien Dorval (Seamus); Brendan Fletcher (Finn); David LaHaye (Claude); Tom McCamus (Wallace Rowlands); Matthew Walker (Doc Murphy); Fabian Bird (Milo); Kirk Jarrett (Owen); David MacInnis (Cormac); Steve Mitchell (Geoffrey); Edna Rain (Elder).

CREW: Lions Gate Films, 49 Films, Combustion and Copperhead Entertainment present *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning*. Casting: Carmen Kotyk. Production Designer: Todd Cherinawsky. Costume Designer: Alex Kavanaugh. Music: Alex Khaskin. Special Effects: Bleeding Art Industries, KNB EFX Group, Toybox. Director of Photography: Michael Marshall. Film Editor: Ken Filewych. Producers: Paula Devonshire, Grant Harvey, Steven Hoban. Executive Producers: Jason Constantine, John Fawcett, Phillip Mellows, Noah Segal, Donna Sloan. Based on characters created by: Karen Walton. Written by: Christina Roay, Stephen Massicotte. Directed by: Grant Harvey. Br M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1815, two sisters, Ginger (Isabelle) and Brigitte (Perkins), make their way through the Canadian wilderness to Fort Bailey after traveling through an Indian camp. Ginger is bitten by what she thinks is a boy but is actually a werewolf. At Fort Bailey, which has been under siege by lycanthropes, the girls are greeted suspiciously by the local reverend, but Brigitte and Ginger are sisters “bound in blood” and stick together, regardless of the challenges they face.

COMMENTARY: Much like (the inferior) *Tremors 4*, the third *Ginger Snaps* movie travels back in time a century or so, but highlights familiar actors in similar, period roles, replaying, essentially, the same material that they played in the modern original film in the franchise.

In this case, that retelling results in bringing Ginger and Brigitte Fitzgerald back to live the same encounter with a werewolf that their descendants would experience a century-and-a-half later (as

depicted in the franchise's first two films). For some, the prequel's premise may be a bridge too far, but in the case of *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning*, the replaying of the central sibling relationship and the deadly encounter with a lycanthrope actually plays into some key elements of the overall saga and adds to the overall tapestry of the tale.

The story of *Ginger Snaps* is, after all, cyclical in nature, contending both with the menses cycle, and the cycle of the werewolf. So, it is not, perhaps, strange or inappropriate to showcase a film that boasts the notion that these two young women—trapped in a cycle of misogyny over time—experience the same story, the same challenges, again and again, throughout history. The period story works regarding the original *Ginger Snaps* because of this notion of “cycles,” and the notion of repeating cycles of time. Granted, some viewers will see it as a stretch of credibility to see the same actors playing essentially the same characters and broaching the same dangers, in another time period.

A more serious detriment to the film, however, is the fact that the modern film predecessors, occurring in a less formal age, seem funnier and edgier in comparison. There is a more somber, solemn and formal aspect to *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning* which, from a certain point of view, makes it less fun, and also less funny. The moments here that attempt humor (such as the rejoinder “*you hit like a girl!*”) feel a bit out of place in the 1815 setting.

However, again, there is another way to look at it. Basically, the idea underlining all three films is the bond between sisters, a bond that is paramount, even in the face of boys, patriarchal society, and lycanthropy.

After a fashion, this prequel gets at those points most clearly, though admittedly without the witty repartee of the two previous films. Here, Brigitte and Ginger go up against a human monster, the reverend, and a society which openly and loudly disdain women. This fire-and-brimstone “man of God” preaches against the temptation women cause, and there is even a discussion of the dangers of men “*casting*” their seed into “*heathen bitches*.” The preacher openly refers to women as temptresses and attempts to set up a sense of “law” in which the sisters must commit murder to end their curse.

But Brigitte and Ginger, “*bound by blood*,” do not obey the strictures of this parochial, anti-woman society. They reject the authority of the reverend, and of the fort, and leave for greener pastures. They defy, even, the vision, provided of male authority, and Brigitte kills the hunter instead of Ginger. The message is therefore, clearly, that their bond of sisterhood is more important than any relationship imposed from outside, from male authority. Their day of reckoning finds Ginger and Brigitte united and independent, and that's probably as strong and feminist a note that the saga could have possibly ended on. The saga ends with the sisters leaving civilization, essentially, as pioneers, seeking out a new home. We know that they eventually find that home (and more problems) from the previous chapters, but to end the *Ginger Snaps* movement on a note of unity and exploration seems the right thing to do for a low-budget horror series that unexpectedly caught fire, and achieved momentary popularity in the pop culture firmament

***Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed (DTV)* * * ***

Critical Reception

“The *Ginger Snaps* sequel is interesting in that it is its own film, borrowing pieces of the original to tell its own story. While the original seemed steeped in the biological changes that happen during puberty, *Ginger Snaps 2* addresses the behavioral changes, particularly the drives for both sex and self-destruction. It is definitely a departure from a werewolf film, where to some degree the Emily Perkins character of Brigitte the lycanthrope to be is eclipsed by another character (Ghost), while the late Ginger herself appears only as an occasional apparition in her best *Curse of the Cat People* way.

Brigitte is all about self-medicating her problems in the sequel, trying to stave off her inevitable transformation, the ultimate fear of growing up, even to the point of cutting off the tips of her increasingly pointed ears, while Ghost will ultimately exploit the animal inside Brigitte that will inevitably escape. Ghost, for all that her name implies, is not a supernatural force, but she is the primary monster of the film, not

Brigitte. It's a clever switch, if perhaps a little unsatisfying—we've been following the story of Brigitte for two films now and it seems sad that she is relegated to a monster in the basement by the end of the sequel. The story arcs, therefore, get just a bit muddled, making this a less satisfactory film than the first, but credit where credit is due, it honored much of the tone of the original, even if it did start telling an increasingly divergent story that basically leaves the werewolf elements of its nature, well, in the basement."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Emily Perkins (Brigitte); Brendan Fletcher (Jeremy); Katharine Isabelle (Ginger); Tatiana Maslany (Ghost); Susan Adam (Barbara); Janet Kidder (Alice); Chris Fassbender (Luke); Pascale Hutton (Beth-Ann); Michaelle Beaudoin (Winnie); Eric Johnson (Tyler); David McNally (Marcus); Patricia Idlette (Dr. Bookner); Lydia Lau (Koral); Coralie Cairns (Nurse); Shaun Johnston (Jack); Jake McKinnon (The Beast); Trigger (Rocky).

CREW: Lions Gate, and Copperheart Entertainment present *Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed*. Casting: Carmen Kotylik, Jenny Lewis. Production Designer: Todd Cheriniawsky. Music: Kurt Swinghammer. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Toybox. Directors of Photography: Henry Less, Gavin Smith. Film Editor: Michele Conroy. Producers: Paula Devonshire, Grant Harvey, Steven Hoban. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Jason Constantine, John Fawcett, Noah Segal. Based on characters created by: Karen Walton. Written by: Megan Martin. Directed by: Brett Sullivan. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Brigitte Fitzgerald (Perkins) continues her slow but steady transformation into a werewolf following her confrontation with her now-dead sister, Ginger (Isabelle). Brigitte now sees Ginger as an apparition, even as she is hunted by another werewolf, and incarcerated at the Happier Times Care Center, a rehabilitation clinic. There, Brigitte attends group therapy and attempts to curb her lycanthropy with the help of a substance, monkshood. She also befriends a young woman, Ghost (Maslany), whose mother, an apparent burn victim, is convalescing at the clinic, and contends with Tyler (Johnson), a manipulative and exploitive employee there.

COMMENTARY: Perhaps the biggest disappointment of *Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed* is the relatively brief presence of Katharine Isabelle's Ginger. Isabelle, who in the 2000s and 2010s became a horror icon, is reduced to almost a cameo presence in this sequel, and so the film boasts a remarkably different feel. On one hand, sequels do need to chart new territory, while on the other, the anarchic Ginger, and Isabelle's portrayal of the character, was one of the undisputed highlights of the hit first film. Emily Perkins is a much more internal performer, less outward and demonstrative. The change in lead performances makes the sequel feel very different.

Accordingly, one may miss the more apparent, saucy spirit of the first film in this effort.

Although a werewolf movie in terms of genre, *Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed* also takes a hard left towards "group therapy" horror film, in the tradition of such efforts as *Phobia* (1980), *A Nightmare on Elm Street: Dream Warriors* (1987) and *Bad Dreams* (1988), with its setting of a clinic, and the presence of medical personnel, some good, some sinister. Tyler, for example, is the orderly here who offers the females drugs in exchange for sexual favors, continuing the series exploration of toxic masculinity, and a feminist response to it. At one point, Tyler even asks Brigitte if she can "smile?" a trademark insult/comment by men about women whom they feel are not responding appropriately to their humor or charm.

There's also a fascinating sequence here in which the werewolf cycle is again tied to female sexuality. Brigitte experiences a sexual dream, involving masturbating women, and when she awakes, discovers that she has a hairy palm. At another point, the tips of Brigitte's ears are found to be pointed (part of the lycanthropic transformation) and she cuts off the pointed tips, an action which seems an off-kilter allusion to genital mutilation. If lycanthropy represents Brigitte's burgeoning, awaking sexuality, and the symptoms of lycanthropy—hairy palms, pointed ears—visualize that awaking sexuality, then the act of removing the symbol of lycanthropy is also an attempt to remove sexuality. On a more direct

analytical path, the act of cutting the tips of the ears refers to self-harm, or self-injury, an act which can be related to sexual orientation, or sexual injury, and which ties into Brigitte's character.

The film also ends on an ambiguous note that is not resolved in the next film (a prequel to the original, set in 1815). Here, Ghost imprisons a wounded Brigitte, who wishes to die, but idolizes her (in artistic renderings) as a kind of super-heroic werewolf. Unpacking all this, Ghost—a bundle of post-traumatic pathology—views Brigitte, who has defeated the evil werewolf and dispatched with the exploitive Tyler, as a kind of role model for free expression/behavior, even though Brigitte is a haunted individual. All this may sound confusing, but *Ginger Snaps 2*, a movie about a world of dysfunction and trauma, embraces its darkest narrative threads with eyes wide-open. It may not be the sequel that fans of the original film may have desired, in part because of Isabelle's reduced participation, but it is a decent and effective sequel that attempts to go deeper than *Ginger Snaps*, at the risk, occasionally, of losing its audience

The Grudge * * * *

Critical Reception

"Non-linear storytelling and a third-act shuffle of the narrative deck elevates *The Grudge* above most of its contemporaries..."—Robert. K. Elder, *Chicago Tribune* "*Grudge* ghosts behaving badly delivers the goods," October 22, 2004, page 7A.

"...*The Grudge* takes its time rationing intermittent jolts all the way up to history's millionth *Carrie*-like capper."—Mike Clark, *USA Today*: "Familiar *Grudge* holds up fairly well," October 22, 2004, page E5.

"Dear Hollywood,

I must express my admiration to you (and I know you're not 'a' person) for doing something that wouldn't seem possible. Get Sam Raimi to somehow arrange for Takashi Shimizu to come to America, give him money, and ask him to remake something he's already remade multiple times on Japanese TV and film (to one degree or another), introduce Sarah Michelle Gellar and all of the good will that comes with her from genre fans, and somehow produce something so bland that it tarnishes the franchise it sought to honor.

Okay, Hollywood, maybe that's unfair. After all, we've seen the original *Ju-On* like the horror buffs we are, so the novelty of those amazingly scary images, recreated in exacting detail, would no longer exist. But Hollywood, you don't understand that we watch the Japanese originals—we're the word-of-mouth folks who will tell people to go see this! So that's why we hate you, and this film, and the abominable sequels to it that you keep producing, because all you care about is money. I get it, it's very meta, that you ... exploit ... exploitation films! But why do you need to suck the life out of all that is good in the world? This is truly why we can't have nice things.

Sincerely, Film Fans

P.S. We can have good things. We can go watch the Japanese original. And if your intent was to get us to do that, then we owe you."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Sarah Michelle Gellar (Karen); Jason Behr (Doug); William Mapother (Matthew); Clea DuVall (Jennifer); KaDee Strickland (Susan); Grace Zabriskie (Emma); Bill Pullman (Peter) Rosa Blasi (Maria); Ted Raimi (Alex); Ryo Ishibashi (Nakagawa); Yoko Maki (Yoko); Yuya Ozeki (Toshio); Tokako Fuji (Kayako); Takashi Matsuyama (Takeo); Hiroshi Matsunaga (Igarashi); Hajime Okayama (Suzuki).

CREW: Sony Pictures Entertainment, Columbia Pictures, and Ghost House Pictures present *The Grudge*. Casting: Nancy Naylor Battino, Kelly Wagner. Costume Designers: Shawn Holly Cookson, Miyuki Taniguchi. Production Designer: Iwao Saito. Music: Christopher Young. Special Effects: Big X. Director of Photography: Hideo Yamamoto. Film Editor: Jeff Betancourt. Producers: Taka Ichise, Sam Raimi, Rob Tapert. Executive Producers: Doug Davison, Joe Drake, Nathan Kahane, Carsten Lorenz. Based on the film *Ju-On* by: Takashi Shimizu. Written by: Stephen Susco. Directed by: Takashi Shimizu. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An American student named Karen Davis (Gellar) interns as a care-worker in Tokyo and is assigned to take care of an old woman with dementia, Emma (Zabriskie), following the disappearance of her previous care-worker, Yoko (Maki). At Emma's house, however, Karen discovers a strange child, Toshio (Ozeki), and a dark female spirit or presence. After a stay in the hospital, Karen looks more deeply into the mystery of the house and learns that Emma's family—who live there with her—have all died. The corpses of her son, Matthew (Mapother), and daughter-in-law, Jennifer (DuVall), are discovered in the attic. Also found is a severed jaw. Karen soon learns from Detective Nakagawa (Ishibashi) that three of his police detective friends who went inside the house have also died. She traces the string of murders back to an American professor, Peter Kirk (Pullman), and learns that one of his students, Kayako Saeki (Fuji), had a romantic obsession with him, an obsession that infuriated her husband, Takeo. And Takeo, Kayako, and Toshio all lived in Emma's house.

COMMENTARY: Based on *Ju-On* (2002)—which is actually the fourth film in the Japanese horror franchise—*The Grudge* (2004) is the second big American film of the Japanese horror remake boom of the early 2000s.

In short, *The Grudge* is very much the *Friday the 13th* (1980) to *The Ring's* (2002) *Halloween* (1978). Many of the creative elements of *The Ring*, in fact, are repeated in *The Grudge* (2004). For example, *The Grudge*, directed by Takashi Shimizu, continues with the new (for America) horror paradigm that simply *being present* is enough to render one guilty in the eyes of the supernatural. One need not commit a significant wrong, beyond being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Even more than that, *The Grudge* displays significant uneasiness with then-modern technology such as VCRs and answering machines. Similarly, certain visual symbols—buzzing flies, an oval mirror, photographs, videotape imagery, the dead boyfriend, and a secret family trauma—recur from *The Ring* to *The Grudge*. And yet, this is—again much like the American slasher film examples I listed above—not a case of “copying” or “ripping off” another property. Operating within similar moral and structural parameters, *The Grudge* instead stakes out unique horror territory, and emerges as a successful work of art.

Although the film may not possess, in the final analysis, the raw power and terror of *The Ring*, *The Grudge* is nonetheless deeply creepy, and trades successfully on the notion that a trauma—*much like an answering machine message or a videotape recording*—can be replayed and re-experienced, only with a more horrific effect for the percipient. Psychological trauma, in other words, leaves behind a physical record that can be experienced by others. And by interfacing with it, you become part of the next, bloody chapter.

Especially inventive here is *The Grudge's* complex narrative structure, which in a weird way moves backwards at the same time that it moves forward. *The Grudge* begins at a late point of attack with the arrival at the “grudge”-infected Saeki house by a nurse named Karen (Sarah Michelle Gellar). It then moves, vector-by-vector back to the original source of the infection or trauma: the tragedy of the Saeki family. At the same time, Karen's story draws towards its frightening conclusion.

The only realm in which the American version of *The Grudge* really falters is in its baffling omission of the one character that actually unloosed the rage in the first place, Takeo Saeki, sort of the “patient zero” in the grudge/curse progression diagrammed above. Without his presence, the American version of the material feels somewhat incomplete, like we haven't quite gotten to the core or meaning of this trauma that “*never forgives, never forgets*.” Despite this flaw, *The Grudge* successfully raises hackles, and again asks viewers to contemplate a world in which you can become a victim just because of the room you happen to walk into.

At the heart of *The Grudge* is brutal violence in the family. A father and husband, Takeo, believes that his wife, Kayako has been unfaithful to him with an American professor, Peter Kirk. In a fit of rage, he murders her, and their little boy, Toshio. In that moment of rage, a curse or “grudge” is born that has a life of its own, and like a disease, reaches out to touch anyone who enters the infection zone, in this case the Saeki house. This is a relatively simple story, but *The Grudge's* clever structure permits for it to

take on more meaning and complexity than a linear telling might. Similarly, the American version of *The Grudge* features an element the Japanese films necessarily do not.

Specifically, *The Grudge* trades in a kind of cultural “lost in translation” vibe. Karen and her boyfriend, Douglas (Jason Behr), are strangers in a strange land, and therefore unfamiliar with the city, the people, and the customs. We have seen this idea played out before in American movies, and I have called it *Innocents Abroad*, in honor of Mark Twain. Films such as *Daughters of Satan* (1971), *Beyond Evil* (1980) and *The House Where Evil Dwells* (1982) are a few examples in which Americans overseas must cope with supernatural terror, as well as a lack of understanding of the culture they are visiting.

In *The Grudge*, we get several shots of Karen standing on a train, walking a busy street, and then walking through an alleyway near the Saeki house. Strangers look at her with inscrutable expressions, and there is a sense that they know more than she does. Or that they understand the world in a different way than she does. This fact is pointed out early, when Karen and Douglas pass a shrine and observe a Buddhist ritual that helps the dead find peace. This is an important moment, but the Americans don’t recognize it as one that has great significance in their own lives.

Karen’s lack of understanding of Tokyo and its customs (spiritual and earthbound) is reflected in several shots that reveal her *physically separated by barriers* from fellow city-dwellers. On the train, for example, Karen is framed inside a silver frame (really hold-bars). Before she enters the house, she is likewise positioned between two vertical bars, and so on. All these shots indicate Karen’s “separate” nature not only from Tokyo, but from an understanding of her environs.

The same idea recurs later in the film with Jennifer. She goes shopping at a Japanese grocery store and is at a loss about what items she should buy. She tells her husband, Matthew that she wants to return to America. There’s a deep and unsettling feeling in *The Grudge* that arises not just from the “curse” but from the fact that Karen, Douglas and Jennifer are so far from home, and clearly don’t understand the “spirit” world in the same way that folks such as Detective Nakagawa might.

Again, this is not a small matter given the time period in which *The Grudge* was released. America was locked in the War on Terror, attempting to bring democracy to foreign lands such as Afghanistan and Iraq. But in the case of Iraq, at least, there was the sense that America didn’t fully understand what it was getting into; that ancient and deep conflicts between sects had not been accounted for in our war plans. *The Grudge* connects with and capitalizes on this idea, of a Westerner confronting a worldview not, simply, of the West. Perhaps more to the point, the terrible events of 9/11 itself seems reflected in the “evil” force working in *The Grudge*. The ghost reaches out and destroys American lives, even though Karen is innocent and knows nothing of the events that created “the grudge.” After 9/11, America realized it wasn’t separate from the world, or immune from danger and strife arising elsewhere in the world. In a way, this is very much Karen’s lesson and journey as well.

What remains most striking about *The Grudge* is the manner in which the film connects “the grudge”—a spiritual force—to technology. On several occasions in the film, we hear Susan leave a message on an answering machine, for example. And at one point, Detective Nagakawa watches video footage from a high-rise office building that features the ghost of Kayako. When one couples these instances of characters replaying moments recorded on machines, a connection to the Saeki family (and the curse) becomes apparent. The house or spirits *are also replaying moments from the past*.

Near film’s end, Karen wanders into one such replay, seeing Peter’s final visit to the Saeki home. The audience is asked to confront the idea that a ghost may be, simply, a replay of human rage, a strong emotion impressed on a place and that infects that place. In the Japanese version of this tale, *Ju On: The Grudge*, the final scene alone revealed the source of the grudge, the force doing the actual killing. Little Toshio and Kayako had been seen throughout, but the climactic scene reveals Takeo, and intimates that as the final piece of the grudge “replay,” he is the one who kills the living. Yet Takeo is missing here, except in a brief black-and-white flashback, and so some of the storytelling feels incomplete. Toshio and Kayako died in the grip of rage. They felt that rage, *but it did not originate with them*. It originated with Takeo and his jealousy. By removing him from this film, that last piece is missing, and it is not clear precisely why the female ghost and the child ghost are attacking people.

The Grudge succeeds as an experience, as we watch the spread of the “curse” and come to the

conclusion that it is incapable of escaping the most effective scene in the film involves Susan, and her night-time, office-building experience with the ghosts. A perfectly contained set-piece and a textbook example of splendidly wrought, mounting suspense, the scene reaches to a crescendo of horror with the revelation that the ghosts are inside her apartment, and indeed, under her bed covers with her.

On a very simple level, *The Grudge* is about how rage touches people—even people unconnected to that rage—and ruins their lives. Just by being at the wrong place at the wrong time, people can suffer. This conceit seems like a perfect metaphor for the angry, violent culture we live in today, post-VCU, post-Aurora, post-Sandy Hook. Rage can reach out and grab any of us, at any time, and there's no antidote, no societal cure for it.

As *The Grudge* points out, guilty or innocent, we are all at risk of being “consumed by its fury.”

Incident at Loch Ness * * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“*Incident at Loch Ness* is a truly original work, and a very cheeky one at that filled with end-to-end laughter. The humor is dry and never feels forced. But it's the meta-side of the film that sets it apart from others made in a similar vein. At risk of giving too much away, it plays off Herzog's own legend as a behind-the-camera wild card while directing Klaus Kinski classics such as *Fitzcarraldo* and *Aguirre: The Wrath of God*. Even more importantly, it sets the audience up to dwell on Herzog's ponderings about the role of myth in our lives, even for those of us who might not consider ourselves friends of Nessie.”—Ryan Cracknell, *Movie Views*, February 26, 2005.

“Dwelling blissfully in the long shadow cast by *The Blair Witch Project*, Zak Penn's intelligent, witty and crafty homage to so many things cinematic is a unique ... treat for starved US filmgoers. Penn, whose screen credits have thus far been Hollywood oriented, throws caution to the wind with this mind-bending mockumentary, stocking it with real film people portraying themselves, directing the proceedings as straight as possible, all the while casting a sly, sustained wink at those in the know.”—Roy Frumkes, *Films in Review*, September 17, 2004.

“*Incident at Loch Ness* eventually reveals itself to be a playful commentary on the tension between the ‘real’ and the ‘fake,’ a topic that doesn't get much of a workout by the mildly cheeky proceedings. If not more than a semi-clever lark, though, the film's critical subversion of cinéma-vérité nonetheless subtly links it to the non-fiction work of Herzog, who's spent a lifetime rebelling against traditional documentary forms in search of his deeper, ‘ecstatic’ truth.”—Nick Schager, *Lessons of Darkness*, August 9, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Werner Herzog (Himself); Zak Penn (Himself); Kitana Baker (Herself); Gabriel Beristain (Himself); Russell Williams (Himself); David A. Davidson (Himself); Michael Karnow (Himself); Robert O'Meara (Himself); Steven Gardner (Himself),

CREW: 20th Century-Fox and Eden Rock Media present *Incident at Loch Ness*. Costume Design: Annie Dunn. Special Effects: Black Box Digital. Music: Henning Lohner. Director of Photography: John Bailey. Film Editors: Abby Schwarzwald, Howard E. Smith. Producer: Werner Herzog. Executive Producers: Thomas Augsberger, Jay Rifkin. Written and Directed by: Zak Penn. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A film crew making a cinematic biography of legendary director Werner Herzog follows him as he embarks on his latest project: a documentary, shot on location in Scotland, about the Loch Ness Monster. For the first time in his career, Herzog is accompanied by a Hollywood producer, Zak Penn. Penn feels that Herzog's ideas will prove even more compelling if backed up by manufactured drama, like monster sightings and busty sonar operators in bikinis. This conflict about the vision for the film creates tension on the boat *Discovery 4*, as Herzog attempts to discern the truth about Nessie. While Herzog attempts to remain committed to his vision and Penn takes every opportunity to spice it up,

something strange happens. A real-life sea monster appears and threatens the ship and filmmakers.

COMMENTARY: *Incident at Loch Ness* (2004) is a mock documentary from director Zak Penn that stars legendary filmmaker Werner Herzog. The movie is part horror movie and part comedy. But like the best of the horror genre, the film goes beyond scary scenes to comment on something important, in this case, filmmaking. Specifically, *Incident at Loch Ness* involves a seemingly eternal debate. Is film merely commerce? Or is film something greater? Is it art? This question is pondered in the mock-doc through two primary characters, or more aptly, two personalities. They are mirror images.

Herzog is the resolute, thoughtful artist, a man who makes movies to explore ideas and enhance not merely knowledge, but self-knowledge. His movie within the movie—a documentary about the Loch Ness Monster—is conceived by the filmmaker as an exploration of the differences between “*fact and truth*.” For Herzog, the film isn’t about discovering a monster at all; it’s about discovering why the monster’s existence matters to so many millions of people. Herzog wants to explore what it is about man and his nature that demands the creations of legends like Big Foot or Nessie. Why do we believe? Why do we want to believe? These are the questions that consume Herzog.

By contrast, Zak Penn plays the film’s craven producer, a man who feels that Herzog’s movie can only be bankable if there’s some manufactured drama. He casts a gorgeous, busty Playboy model as a ship’s “sonar operator.” He has a prop man create a fake “Nessie” monster for the documentary crew to encounter. Now, pity poor Zak Penn, because he plays, for lack of a better word, the film’s villain; the individual who wishes to reduce every one of Herzog’s brilliant, cerebral concepts to crass commercialism. Since he is the director of *Incident at Loch Ness*, and he casts himself as the voice for film as commerce here, audiences must assume that Penn is aware that he will be pilloried by critics and audiences as being representative of everything that is wrong with Hollywood filmmaking. In fact, Penn is *commenting* on Hollywood filmmaking. He is using his own name to expose a certain brand of producer, despite the fact that a certain segment of the audience will simply think he is playing “himself.”

He’s actually taking a bullet for the team, and for the movie.

But it’s a smart move, because Penn’s presence and worldview brings better into focus Herzog’s worldview. *Incident at Loch Ness* is presented as a documentary about the search for the Loch Ness Monster, but that surface description tells little of the movie’s style and substance. This is really a film about the gap between independent filmmaking and Hollywood filmmaking, between film art, and film as product, or commerce. The film is sharp, funny, exciting, and caustic in its observations. Finally, *Incident at Loch Ness* reminds us that what some filmmakers deem “reality” may not be real at all.

Reality may simply be that which sells best.

Incident at Loch Ness is funny in part because of the dead-pan approach of all the actors. The result is a film that, at times, feels alarmingly authentic. But here’s the distinction: it feels *Hollywood* real. If you’ve spent anytime interfacing with Hollywood personalities, you likely know what I mean. A few years back, this author was on a conference call with a notable “star” and listened, aghast, as he discussed at length—during a story session—how he could not be photographed sitting down or wearing certain attire. This went on and on, as he promised to give “110 percent” to the project ... so long as he wasn’t seated at the time, apparently, or filmed from that offending perspective. What’s the message? You get to Hollywood, and achieve a certain level of success, and you start to feel entitled to make selfish and weird demands like that. Demands that don’t necessarily concern the project (the art), but rather your image, your career.

In *Incident at Loch Ness*, Penn brings in “acting” personalities who are like that: a model and an actor who are looking to get screen time and further their individual careers. For them, the project isn’t really about art, or about ideas. It’s about leveraging a credit to maximum profit. When he discovers that a boat’s engine is too loud for filming, he demands either a new boat, or a transplanted engine that will be less noisy. The poor ship’s captain who must accommodate—or be fired—has about a day to perform that switcheroo. Penn bullies him into compliance. And when the ship’s radio proves too noisy too, Penn

orders an underling to have the ship removed, despite the fact that the radio is a necessity in case of a crisis on the water. Nothing, in other words, will stop Penn from getting his way. And his way includes renaming the ship, assigning the crew uniforms (with the word expedition misspelled), and adding tits and ass in the form of the ship's sonar director. He even stages false Nessie sightings. "*I distorted things so they would be more dramatic*," Penn reports when things go disastrously awry on the expedition. He even retreats to the stance that cinema consists of mostly "lies," but, clearly, he has misunderstood the amazing career of Herzog, whom Penn holds at gunpoint during one sequence.

Herzog may stage a "lie" in a (fiction) film to get at some point or deep truth, but Penn wants to lie in a documentary to make it *more bankable*. He's incapable of seeing the difference between those two approaches. He doesn't strive for authenticity. He isn't trying to make a point. He wants the movie to be a hit.

Herzog also proves to be a great and powerful presence in the film. He exudes gravitas and authenticity because every student of film understands what he has gone through—and put others through—to achieve his artistic vision. Again, when Herzog pushes people it isn't for more money, or for fame, it's ostensibly because he is exploring something. It's because he wants to discover or know something. There's something terribly ironic, and indeed hellish, about his journey here. Herzog suffers not in the pursuit of art, but for commercialism, at the hands of Penn. Perhaps this is why he sees the documentary, during its final moments, as a horror show; as something "*doomed from the beginning*," that "*didn't want to come to life*."

Incident at Loch Ness is clever too, in the way it proves self-reflexive. Herzog opines, early on, that mankind "*need monsters*." This movie provides not one, but two monsters. First, there's Nessie—which attacks the ship—and secondly, there's Penn himself. Movies need monsters too, the film suggests. The audience could not appreciate Herzog's character if it did not witness it in direct comparison to Penn's. The filmmakers need Penn to take that bullet for the movie, and to play the worst, most craven and crass producer imaginable. The audience couldn't understand, perhaps, the value of a "*typical Herzog-ian moment*" if it didn't have the anti-matter representation of its opposite, symbolized by Penn. It's also quite ironic that Herzog is described, in the film, as having a reputation as a "*dangerous*" filmmaker for exploring worlds and ideas that are uncomfortable and difficult to capture on celluloid. Because what *Incident at Loch Ness* proves so adeptly is that it is actually the film-as-commerce voice—Penn—who is truly dangerous. To make money, he risks everybody's survival. People die because of the choices he makes on the documentary. Cinematographers may not be "cowards" according to Herzog, but that rule does not apply to entitled Producers, apparently.

This review likely makes *Incident at Loch Ness* sound ultra-serious, but the truth is that the movie is both funny and tense, and finally a little scary and sad. The result? A life gets turned into a horror movie. Fortunately, not a "*vulgar and pointless*" one, as Herzog fears during the film's conclusion. Rather, an entertaining and thoughtful one.

*The Last Horror Movie (DTV) * * * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kevin Howarth (Max); Mark Stevenson (The Assistant); Antonia Beamish (Petra); Christabel Muir (Sam); Jonathan Coote (John); Rita Davies (Grandma); Joe Hurley (Ben); Jamie Langthorne (Nico); John Berlyne (Phil); Mandy Gordon (Sarah); Jim Bywater (Bill); Lisa Renee (Waitress); Christopher Adamson (Killer); Adrian Johnson (Kelly); John MacCrossan (Groom).

CREW: Prolific Films Presents, on association with Snakehair productions, a film by Julian Richards, *The Last Horror Movie*. Casting: Julian Richards. Production Designer: Bettina Eberhard. Costume Designer: Jason Gill. Music: Simon Lambros. Director of Photography: Chris St. John Smith. Film Editor: Claus Wehlisch. Producers: Zorana Piggott, Julian Richards. Executive Producers: William Richards, Mike Tims. Story by: Julian Richards. Written by: James Handel. Directed by: Julian Richards. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 80

minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the middle of a VHS recording of a horror movie set in a diner called Starvin' Marvin's, a serial killer named Max (Howarth) breaks in, recording over the horror film. A wedding videographer by profession, Max begins to describe his crimes to the viewer. He tells the audience how he began committing murders five years earlier, beginning with a homicide that looked like a suicide, but wasn't. Max reports how he kills eight to ten people a year, and how his job as a videographer provides him access to free food, free liquor, and a victim pool. Max recounts how he recruits an assistant, a cameraman, to record his crimes, and how that cameraman gets cold feet, requiring the acquisition of a new assistant, Ben (Hurley). Finally, and ominously, Max tells the viewer that this is the last horror movie they will ever see.

COMMENTARY: Julian Richards' *The Last Horror Movie*, a British production, knows exactly what it is, and what it hopes to be, and the director plays self-reflexively with those ideas. *The Last Horror Movie* is, knowingly, "*some art-house film that's supposed to look like a home-movie*," a found footage variation on *American Psycho* (2000). Like that great horror movie, *The Last Horror Movie* is a tantalizing and morbidly funny peek into the insane mind of a psychopath. Here, that killer is named Max, and the filmmakers reveal his long journey from serial killer noob to murder maestro. The film knowingly and frequently breaks the fourth wall, as Max addresses his audience repeatedly. That audience is both the "in-universe" customer who rented a VHS horror movie expecting something completely different, and us, those real-life percipients experiencing the actual film. It's a clever enough conceit to carry the film for 80 minutes successfully. *The Last Horror Movie* is smart, silly, and scary, simultaneously.

The Last Horror Movie works because its messy combination of humor and horror reflects the chaos of real life. For example, Max's first victim is Tim, an assistant manager at a local retail store. Max beats him to death with a meat tenderizer, but the camera falls over, so the audience is not privy to the death blow. This isn't the world of Jason, Freddy or Michael Myers, where omniscient killers dispatch their victims with perfect acuity. Instead, it's our world, or a mirror to it, where things can go wrong, even for serial killers.

At one point, the film cuts to a montage of Max hitting people in the head with the aforementioned meat tenderizer. It's brutal, but also effective in terms of its gallows humor. The montage suggests that Max has turned something as crucial as life and death into a workaday experience. Again, drawing a distinction between himself or someone like the sarcastic, wisecracking Chucky, Max tells a victim "*I'm not going to say anything flippant or ironic to you.*" He's out to make his own intelligent movie about murder, and he shares that desire with the actual filmmakers.

Sometimes, *The Last Horror Movie* is downright terrifying, and unpredictable. For instance, at one point, Max picks up a child after school in his car, and the audience inference (or assumption) is that he is abducting the child to murder him. On the contrary, Max is actually just picking the boy up and taking him home to his family. The boy's mother is Max's older sister. Thus, what could have been something truly debauched and uncomfortably transgressive unpredictably turns into a family discussion about the meaning of life. Max asks his sister if her life is really satisfying. Ostensibly, his life is happy, because of what Max terms his "*personal project*," his murder moonlighting. In fact, Max's big regret seems to be that he cannot entice others into his project. His assistant simply won't invest in the murder. "*It's important you participate fully in this project*," he admonishes him.

The Last Horror Movie muses intelligently over many ideas about media, and horror films, in particular. Max seems to comment on the post 9/11 grimness and goriness of the genre, for instance, by noting "*It looks you can't do anything really interesting without giving people a shock.*" Later, he asks his audience "*why are you still watching?*"

This interrogative is not to be taken lightly.

Why do people watch stories, whether in horror, the true crime genre, or even war films, about

people committing terrible atrocities? Why would someone want to watch a film about a murderer brutalizing people? The answer is that, of course, art always imitates life. Life is savage and life is sacred, and the great question of every human life is mortality. We are all going to die someday. Horror movies fill a need in people to confront their own mortality, to face the most horrible things, and, at the end, come through the other side, having faced down fear. *The Last Horror Movie* acknowledges the universality of death by having Max note, breaking the fourth wall again, that “*whatever happens, this is going to be your last horror movie.*”

He is telling his in-universe audience, and his real audience, that nothing is promised, including tomorrow. He makes explicit two ideas. One is that no matter how monstrous, a sense of voyeurism and need for catharsis keeps audiences watching horror movies. The second idea is that the audience will continue to watch, even knowing that we are mortal, and we could be the next “stars” of Max’s (or anyone’s) murder show.

If *The Last Horror Movie* has much in common with *American Psycho*, it also might be seen in terms of its similarities with another great horror film of this decade, *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006). Both films take audiences behind-the-scenes, as it were, as a psychopath seeks to become famous, and beloved, for his anti-social behavior. *Behind the Mask* plays specifically with slasher movie clichés, while *The Last Horror Movie* asks audiences to consider why they love horror, especially since they are not immune to death. The found footage format is useful here because the filmmakers, by breaking the fourth wall so regularly, create an intimacy with Max, similar to the intimacy audiences feel with Leslie Vernon.

Funny Games (2007) is another film of the decade that asks audiences why they embrace horror and violence on screen, but *The Last Horror Movie* is less abstract, and more immediate. And unlike *American Psycho*, *The Last Horror Movie* doesn’t give itself an out in Max’s insanity. It isn’t a delusion, or a hallucination. The audience doesn’t get an “was this real or not?” conclusion that ameliorates the horror and make us think the monstrosity was all in Patrick Bateman’s mind. Instead, it takes the opposite route and suggests that the horror in the film is not only real but coming for you and me next.

Like, right now.

There are so many strong observations about life, and death in *The Last Horror Movie*. Max is a figure who considers himself both powerful, and weak. He is powerful, because, as he notes, “*the advantage of being a psychopath*” is that “*you don’t have to take shit from people.*” At the same time, he is a marginalized and frustrated individual, because the world does not share his view of “art,” and because he is isolated, unable to find a kindred spirit who will commit to his art as he does.

In short, *The Last Horror Movie* is a layered, thoughtful and funny horror movie, and one that, like *Lake Mungo*, or *Leslie Vernon*, reveals how the derided format of found footage can actually deepen a viewer’s connection to characters or a narrative.

My Little Eye (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Sean CW Johnson (Matt); Kris Lemche (Rex); Stephen O'Reilly (Danny); Laura Regan (Emma); Jennifer Sky (Charlie); Nick Mennell (Police Officer); Bradley Cooper (Travis Patterson).

CREW: Focus Features, WT2 Productions, Working Title Films and ImX Communications present a Marc Evans film, *My Little Eye*. Casting: Kerry Barden, Mark Bennett, Suzanne Crowley, Billy Hopkins. Costume Designer: Kate Rose. Production Designer: Crispian Sallis. Music: Bias. Special Effects: Double Negative. Director of Photography: Hubert Taczanowski. Film Editor: Marguerite Arnold. Producers: Jonathan Finn, Alan Greenspan, David Hitton, Jane Villiers. Executive Producers: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Natascha Wharton. Written by: David Hitton, James Watkins. Directed by: Marc Evans. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Five young adult contestants—Matt (Johnson), Rex (Lemche), Danny (O'Reilly), Emma (Regan) and Charlie (Sky)—undertake a reality show challenge. They agree to spend six months together in a remote, dilapidated house where they will be recorded the entire time, day and night. If they stay in the house, they win a million dollars. If any one of the contestants leaves in those six months, however, they all forfeit the prize money. The show is to be aired as a “reality webcast” on the internet. At first, the months in the house pass uneventfully, but soon disturbing events occur. A package with a loaded gun and a bottle of champagne, arrives at the house, for example. One contestant, Danny, receives news that his grandfather, who raised him, has died, and wishes to attend the funeral. To do so, however, would mean all the contestants lose. Then, a stranger, Travis (Cooper), arrives at the house, and has sex with Charlie. He also seems to know where the cameras in the house are positioned. As the housemates grow tense, they learn the truth about the webcast and its audience. They are starring, it turns out, in a snuff show, in which the wealthy viewers (for a subscription of 50,000 dollars) watch and bet on who will live and who will die.

COMMENTARY: “*What kind of sick fuck would subscribe to this?*” A character asks in *My Little Eye*, a horror film that rakes over the coals the 2000s trend of reality television. Here, in a set-up not at all unlike the international TV franchise, *Big Brother* (1999–), housemates must endure in a house together while forming alliances, and so forth, all while under the watchful eye of cameras that never stop recording.

For many, the reality show trend of the 2000s was greatly disturbing. Series like *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *Temptation Island*, *Boot Camp*, *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*, *The Bachelor* and *Joe Millionaire* all seemed to play to the worst instincts in human nature. Contestants on these programs were encouraged to lie, cheat, betray one another and vote each other off the island, all so they would be the last one standing, and have the opportunity for monetary gain. By and large, these series are all dehumanizing and reveal humans to be greedy, selfish creatures. The programs can also be mean-spirited. *Joe Millionaire*, for instance, encouraged its female contestants to be the romantic selection of the titular character. The only problem was, his identity was a lie. He was not a millionaire. So, the women on the show were encouraged to debase themselves over a lie. It wasn't just sick, it was mean-spirited.

By and large, this viewpoint was not shared by TV networks and producers, who realized that reality shows are a cash cow. Why? Reality shows don't require writers or actors. Therefore, writers and actors don't have to be paid. The shows are cheap to make at the same time that they cheapen the culture. The reality show created all kinds of celebrities for 15 minutes: the backbiters, the ones seeking

ame, the true hearts just trying to provide their family, and even a future President of the United States, Donald Trump, on *The Apprentice*.

Between cheap quiz shows like *The Weakest Link* and cheap reality programming, the TV catalog of the early 2000s proved quite grotesque, until *Lost*'s rating success revived the scripted drama in 2004. By then, of course, the damage was done. By 2004, America had seen a parade of young people, primarily, willingly debase themselves by being buried in scorpions, or eating buffalo testicles, all for a fleeting shot at fame and fortune. *My Little Eye* takes on this trend of the decade, and in many ways, forecasts some of the trends of the 2010s as well. Basically, the movie posits an evil clientele watching a reality show made just for them; one that is a snuff show. They wager money to see who will die next in the house with the cameras. The idea here is not just that people are willing to debase themselves and betray their friends for a shot at being rich, but the ultra-rich hover, vulture-like, just beyond the sight of the masses, making us endure such bread and circuses for their entertainment. In the 2010s, there was a name for this elite: "the 1%" and movements such as Occupy Wall Street attempted to expose the ways that the one percent exploited the other 99 percent.

Not long after *My Little Eye*, horror films also ran with this concept. In Eli Roth's *Hostel*, for example, Elite Hunting turns unlucky tourists into game for the sick fetishes of the ultra-rich. In the 2014 horror movie *The Den*, a woman runs afoul of another Internet gimmick for the rich to hunt and torture the less affluent. Even the (excellent) 2013 horror movie *Would You Rather* involves a game played by the rich, which harms the poor. Many see this as a metaphor for the accumulation of wealth in the United States, in a capitalist system that has gone crazy. The poor get a chance to participate in the wealth in films like *Would You Rather* and *My Little Eye* but discover that the system is rigged. They are never more than chattel for the amusement of the super wealthy. They will never be invited to the party as equals. Their mission is to generate the wealth for the rich, and to no more.

Much of *My Little Eye* is shot from odd angles, as the cameras for the TV show capture the action in the house. This approach makes the movie feel like a TV reality show and reminds the audience at all times that someone unseen is actually watching, and perhaps even manipulating events. The approach is not found footage, exactly, but a corollary, at least after a fashion. The film also apes the reality show template by having outside influence ramp up the drama for the contestants. It is a well-known fact that producers on such series work behind the scenes to make the action more dramatic, and to bring about confrontation, when possible. Here, the outsiders make certain that a dead bird is delivered to the house, unnerving the contestants, as well as a loaded gun. Even Travis's presence in the house, which would seem to be against the rules serve this purpose. He goes in for the express purpose of getting Charlie to have sex with him ("*I told you I could fuck her*," he intones to a nearby camera, when no one is watching), making certain, in the process, that the high-paying audience at home gets its money's worth. It's no secret that reality shows aren't real. They are manipulated to be as entertaining and melodramatic as possible. *My Little Eye* plays with this notion via Travis's presence, as well as the creepy packages that keep arriving.

My Little Eye also captures the idea that any fame on reality TV is fleeting. These "stars" burn out quickly and are easily replaced by next season's new and better "guests" or "house-mates," or "bachelorettes." At movie's end, a character notes that there are always more "suckers" out there willing to sign up for the show, on the possibility that they can get rich. America, and the world, since this is a British film apparently have an endless supply of people who want to get rich quick and have their fifteen minutes of fame. Indeed, the reality show "world" is so pervasive that, as *My Little Eye* notes "*you're always on prime time somewhere*."

My Little Eye is clever and well-done, even in spite of some rough spots. Seen on TV at one point is *The Breakfast Club*, a 1985 film about a diverse group of high school students who must share a high school one Saturday while at detention, and in the process, grow to appreciate each other. The situation in *My Little Eye* is clearly an imperfect reflection. There are five people staying at the house for the reality webcast, as there were five students in detention. And nothing like that sense of understanding dawns among this group. Each individual remains committed to themselves, and no *esprit de corps* arises from confinement, at least not in any meaningful fashion. It's not surprising that this bonding doesn't occur.

The characters are pretty predictable, Emma tells a story, for instance, about a boy named John and a game she played with him called “*Scaredy Cat*,” that involved, apparently, the throwing of a beloved cat into a swimming pool. It’s a pretty horrible story that exposes Emma, the film’s would-be-heroic final girl, as something of a monster. True, she isn’t as monstrous as the others, but the film seems to suggest that anyone who would make the bargain to be a contestant on such a show isn’t exactly going to be a great person. Emma may not be a murderer, and she may be better than her housemates. But that’s like being voted the nicest inmate in prison.

My Little Eye could stand to be a little fast moving, a little more engaging, and a little less sedate at times. But credit its filmmakers for understanding and mocking the worldwide reality TV show craze, and also for forecasting the soon-to-be current idea of the rich literally preying on the lives of the poor. It’s a double punch lampooning the film’s present and predicting the world’s immediate future.

Not bad for a low budget picture.

If you get a chance to see it, don’t vote it off your island.

Open Water * * * *

Critical Reception

“Shot over a period of three years on a budget that should shame Hollywood, Kentis and Lau are instant stars. Since Hollywood has been looking for the next *The Blair Witch Project*, here it is. This is a stunning debut with an attractive cast. I will not spoil the climax, but it does not let down the audience.”—Victoria Alexander, *Films in Review*, August 20, 2004.

“...this movie smacks us in the face with the indiscriminate power of nature and the vulnerability of human beings. In the end, no matter how many technological achievements we achieve, we’re all just part of the food chain. *Open Water* is an extremely short film for a feature, running only 79 minutes, and most of it involves the two main characters in the water—with an occasional guest appearance by a shark. But despite the fact that most of the action takes place at the same static pace, you’ll never feel bored.”—Paul Clinton, *CNN*: “Chilling, Terrific, *Open Water*,” August 13, 2004.

“Taking its cues from *Jaws*, the film does more with much less: spiking the tension by teasing the potential for grisly aquatic dismemberment, without any major special effects to lean on. That the filmmaker used actual sharks makes the whole thing even more terrifying ... director Chris Kentis manages to pull off a film that’s ... stiflingly, claustrophobically tense.”—John Semley, *Esquire*, September 19, 2013.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Blanchard Ryan (Susan); Daniel Travis (Daniel); Saul Stein (Seth); Michael Williamson (Davis); Cristina Zenato (Linda); Jon Charles (Junior); Estelle Lau (Estelle).

CREW: Lionsgate films, and Plunge Pictures LLC present *Open Water*. Music: Graeme Revell. Directors of Photography: Chris Kentis, Laura Lau. Film Editor: Chris Kentis. Producers: Estelle and Laura Lau. Written and Directed by: Chris Kentis. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 79 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An overworked American couple, Daniel (Travis) and Susan (Ryan) decide to go on vacation in the Caribbean. They fill every moment of the vacation with colorful excursions, including a scuba diving trip. But once on the dive something goes horribly wrong. A simple counting mistake results in Daniel and Susan getting left behind by their boat in the middle of the sea. Adrift together in a turbulent ocean, with night falling and sharks circling, Daniel and Susan face their grim fates after first re-litigating who is at fault for their dilemma.

COMMENTARY: Shot on digital video, *Open Water* is a fictionalized account of a harrowing real-life incident. In 1998, an American couple was accidentally abandoned at sea by a commercial scuba diving boat following an incorrect head count.



Two terrifying views from the micro-budgeted mega-hit *Open Water* (2004). Top: Susan (Blanchard Ryan) and Daniel (Daniel Travis) are stranded at sea and encounter a shark. Bottom: We get an underwater view of another close encounter with the shark.

Directed by Chris Kentis, *Open Water* depicts the routine of a modern, professional, youthful American couple, Daniel (Daniel Travis) and Susan (Blanchard Ryan). They've ceded too much of their lives to all-consuming careers. When the couple needs a respite, however, their vacation plans, well, kill them. Once lost at sea, Daniel and Susan start facing their incomprehensible truth. No cell phones are available to call for help. No e-mail can type out a distress message. No rescue infrastructure, bureaucracy or "mommy" government will pluck them from the immediate and mortal danger. The easy, automatic, *nay thoughtless* technological connection of their daily lives proves an illusion in nature. And out there, in the swallowing, hungry sea, they have only each other to hold onto.



Two more portraits of *Open Water's* (2004) doomed couple. Top: Daniel (Daniel Travis) and Susan (Blanchard Ryan) wait to begin their ill-fated dive. Bottom: The same couple faces their fate once the diving boat has abandoned them at sea.

The majority of *Open Water's* scanty 79-minute running time is indeed spent at sea, featuring endless, vertigo-producing ocean-level shots of the couple coping with their horrible circumstance. Dan and Susan grow hungry. Fish nip at their legs. They vomit. They urinate. They fall asleep. They clutch at life, and, finally, to each other. It's a chronicle of unceasing agony, a hell on Earth. The authentic location, the naturalism of the nearby threat (no CGI or mechanical sharks here ... *just the real thing*) and the capable hand-held camerawork weave a more-than-sufficient tapestry of dread. This isn't a movie to watch dispassionately, it's one to experience almost literally as a participant. Those eye-level shots put audiences in the water too; so that they too can almost feel the endless, merciless lapping of the waves.

Yet *Open Water* also remains an effective horror film because of the template that forms the bedrock of its simple narrative. This movie with such spare aesthetics and a blunt depiction of the worst no-win scenario imaginable intriguingly mimics Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's famous "*five stages of death and dying*."



Behind the scenes of *Open Water* (2004). Top: Director Chris Kentis. Below: The filmmakers capturing footage of real (and very active) sharks.

Kubler-Ross's theory is that in facing mortality, humans transition through a series of developments or stages. *Open Water* walks the audience through these five stages, as its protagonists attempt to come to terms with their fate in the pounding, eternal ocean. In other words, once it hits the water the movie is about preparing for the inevitable.

In accordance with the first stage of death and dying, at first, there is complete *denial* on the part of these tech-savvy, over-scheduled Americans. Daniel stubbornly clings to the hope that they will be miraculously rescued. In fact, he doesn't even swim towards another boat that is visible on the horizon because he believes so fervently that their diving vessel will recognize the mistake and return to the exact spot where it left them. Needless to say, that doesn't occur.

After a time, *anger* swallows-up denial. Splashing his hands in the water like a petulant child, Daniel bellows at the top of his lungs and throws a temper tantrum. He is bitter that they "paid" for this experience, the opportunity, essentially, to die at the mercy of the sharks. This too is a subtly funny comment on modern Americans. Daniel seems more upset that the company took his money than the fact that he is going to die.

Daniel and Susan then argue a lot, and she blames him for their crisis. This is her encounter with

anger. *He remained underwater looking at fish for too long, she complains, and that's why the boat left.* It's always nice to be able to blame someone else, isn't it?

Ross's third stage of death and dying is *bargaining*. Susan and Daniel talk about how—if only they could just return to their comfortable life in front of the television and the Discovery Channel—they wouldn't be so foolish as to entertain a venture like this again. They stepped out of their natural habitat a technological one, and have paid the price.

Shortly, the fourth stage, *depression*, sets in on our unlucky protagonists. The doomed couple realizes that no one is coming to rescue them and that this is, indeed, how they are going to die. *Here. Today. Now.* No TV, Hollywood bullshit. No last-minute cavalry coming over the hill.

Ross's fifth and final stage—*acceptance*—is at last broached. In one of the most coldly realistic, unflinching and horrifying scenes ever presented in a horror movie, Susan analytically accepts the reality of her situation. This protagonist makes a choice that is carefully weighed as a better option than being eaten by sharks. Our final survivor dips below the sea on purpose, and willingly drowns herself. With Daniel gone (er, eaten), Susan lets the ocean take her under and away from life.

Open Water follows the Ross-style transition from one stage of death and dying to the next stage, from denial all the way through acceptance. The movie ends only when all five stages have been adequately vetted, and this structure grants the horror film a kind of artistic completeness and intellect that is all too rare in the American cinema. It rings scarily true.

Sixteen years or so later, this author still recalls leaving the theater after *Open Water* feeling discomfited and troubled. The movie doesn't blink, doesn't retreat from the reality of the horrifying scenario, and there is no sunlight to part the dark clouds. Instead, the film reminds audiences that they don't control their own fate. Something as simple and ultimately as meaningless as a mistake—*a frigging arithmetic error*—could impact their lives. It's a horrifying thought, and one that we have all considered, no matter how briefly, after the terror we saw on 9/11. And this thematic terrain makes *Open Water* a profound statement about the human condition today.

Da Vinci once stated that water is the driver of nature. In *Open Water*, water is the medium that drives our *human* nature. How do we face inevitable death? Denial? Anger? Bargaining? Depression? Acceptance? *Open Water* is a brilliant horror film and a great character piece because there's something universal in Susan and Daniel's progression through Kubler-Ross's gauntlet of mortality. We recognize the steps.

And we fear them.

For after acceptance ... *oblivion*.

Resident Evil: Apocalypse * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"*Resident Evil: Apocalypse* is just as fun as the first movie despite its obvious bites off of *Dawn of the Dead*, which are so easily recognizable it isn't even funny, plus the fact that there is far too much slow motion employed here for dramatic effect that it is just bad movie making."—Brad Brevet, *Coming Soon Net*, September 10, 2004.

"There is almost no humor, absolutely no sex, and not much acting beyond snarling, screaming, and looking grim (or, in the case of the two female leads, pouting.)."—Pamela Troy, *Culture Vulture*, September 9, 2004.

"Though the sequel drops the arcane 'rules' that made the first film confusing for non-aficionados it still feels like a video game, offering a string of confrontations between various combinations of good and bad guys. The fight sequences—most involving gun play with a smattering of wire-assisted martial arts—are rarely inventive and rely too heavily on fast cutting to create the impression of fast action."—John Hazelton, *Screen Daily*, September 12, 2004.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Milla Jovovich (Alice); Sienna Guillory (Jill Valentine); Oded Fehr (Carlos Olivera); Thomas Kretschmann (Major Caine); Sophie Vavasseur (Angie Ashford); Raz Adoti (Sgt. Peyton Wells); Jared Harris (Dr. Ashford); Mike Epps (LJ.); Sandrine Holt (Terri Morales); Matthew G. Taylor (Nemesis); Zach Ward (Nicolai Ginovaeff); Iain Glen (Dr. Isaacs); Dave Nichols (Captain Henderson); Stefan Hayes (Yuri); Geoffrey Pounsett (Mackenzie).

CREW: Screen Gems, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Davis Films/Impact Pictures, and Constantin Film Ltd. Present *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*. Casting: Tina Gerussi. Production Designer: Paul Denham Austerberry. Costume Designer: Mary E. McLeod. Special Effects: Paul Jones Effects Studio, Frantic Films, Mr. X Inc., C.O.R.E. Digital Pictures. Music: Jeff Danna. Director of Photography: Derek Rogers, Christian Sebaldt. Filmmaker: Eddie Hamilton. Producers: Paul W.S. Anderson, Jeremy Bolt, Don Carmody. Executive Producers: Bernd Eichinger, Samuel Hadida, Victor Hadida, Dan Kletsky, Robert Kulzer. Written by: Paul W.S. Anderson. Directed by: Alexander Witt. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The T-Virus created by the Umbrella Corporation is released into Raccoon City and the zombie apocalypse begins in earnest. As the military cordons off the city so survivors can't escape, lest they spread the virus, Alice (Jovovich) teams up with a cop named Jill Valentine (Guillory) to seek sanctuary. As the powers-that-be plan to sanitize the city with tactical nukes, and Alice feels less and less human, another dire threat emerges, courtesy of Umbrella: the inhuman monster known as Nemesis.

COMMENTARY: There is much weapons fire, but very little narrative bright spots in *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*, the first sequel to the hit film, *Resident Evil*. And speaking of things that there are little of, there is almost no connection in this film, besides character and organization names, to the popular video game series. The games involved Umbrella Corp. and the T-Virus, but mostly occurred on a lonely, mansion estate that was haunted. The setting grew over the 2000s, to other locales, but not at all in the shape seen in this effort.

Resident Evil: Apocalypse continues the journey begun in the original film, of setting up Milla Jovovich's Alice as the equivalent of *Alien's* Ripley. Like the Ripley clone after *Alien Resurrection* (1997), Alice is no longer quite human. The film opens with a shot of her eye as, in voice-over narration, she recounts the events of the first film, and the release of the T-Virus. In the film Alice explicitly notes that she "barely feels human anymore" and she becomes a one-woman army, defending humanity, and battling both the interests of the Umbrella Corp. and the oncoming plague of zombies. Alice is a strong hero, and the 2000s would provide general audiences at least two female action-horror heroes, *Resident Evil's* Alice, and *Underworld's* Selene (Kate Beckinsale). Both are athletic, cunning, and because of their natures, outside of strictly human interests. Selene is a vampiric "Death Dealer," Alice, changed by experimentation and exposure. Since they exist outside strictly human nature, they stand in a spot where they can comment on it and be critical of it.

Resident Evil: Apocalypse is set mostly at night, and its buzzword might be, as one official notes, that "suppression measures have failed." One scientist looks for his daughter, while Alice and also Jill lead survivors to escape. There's a set-piece in a church with a motorcycle, guns, and lots of stained glass. But the film feels more like an extended, stylized music video than it does a consistent narrative. The set-pieces, like one sustained sequence on a bridge overrun with families desperate to escape the city, are well-presented and convincing, but not married to anything that really moves the narrative forward in meaningful ways.

The next film in the series, *Extinction*, occurs entirely post-apocalypse, rather than mid-apocalypse, and harks back to the *Mad Max* films of the 1980s for its aesthetics and narrative. *Apocalypse* has no such model, and as a result flounders at times. The idea of an out-of-control metropolis, and an escape from it by night has worked in other films, such as John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981), but this film features surprisingly little suspense. The series has gone here from horror into full bore action, which may disappoint some viewers. Similarly, the movie keeps its two

female leads scantily clad throughout, and undercuts some of the feminism inherent in the idea of these women as humanity's catchers-in-the-rye, saving innocents as terror abounds.

Despite its concentration on guns and slow-motion action scenes, *Apocalypse* finds time for a few homages. The impending nuke threat, to wipe out a city, may remind the viewer of 1985's *Return of the Living Dead*. The newspaper headline that pops up at one time, screaming "The Dead Walk," comes right out of *Day of the Dead* (1985). These touches prove that *Apocalypse* is aware of its horror history, so it is doubly baffling why the film isn't more coherent, suspenseful, or of a piece.

In terms of commentary, *Apocalypse* continues the series' critique of Big Business, and adds the idea of government malfeasance. Raccoon City is nuked at the end of the film, and some critics connected to this idea to the scare tactics employed by the Bush-Cheney Administration in the run-up to the Iraq War. Administration officials, including Condoleezza Rice were sent out to the press warning that the they didn't want the smoking gun of a terrorist attack to be a "mushroom cloud" over an American city, a harking back to 1980s fears about total nuclear war. *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* repurposes that imagery, to suggest a governmental-corporate alliance, and a secret conspiracy. And, again, this was the era of the "Truthers" and documentaries like *Loose Change*, which suggested that just such an alliance was behind the 9/11 attacks.

Resident Evil: Apocalypse is certainly of its time, and reflects its time, but it doesn't all cohere into a good film, or a consistent one. Without the central organizing location, the Hive, that helped make the first movie coherent (and which made it feel like a cinematic corollary to the video game), there's nothing here to hold everything together. It's just a runaround through a dark city, and two female leads who want to be post-feminist, but are there, mostly, for the ogling, at least if their wardrobe is taken into account.

Saw * * * *

Critical Reception

"If director James Wan had left the lens on the camera for 90 minutes, only to take it off for the final 3 minutes, I still would have given this film a standing ovation. Talk about falling for red herrings only for the truth to be under your nose the entire friggin' time. Genius ending that led to a franchise that JUST WON'T DIE.

The main setting: the cold, damp cellar, filled with blaring fluorescent lights, dripping plumbing, dead bodies, and excrement, appear so realistic, I found myself holding my breath from the imagined stench."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Cary Elwes (Dr. Lawrence Gordon); Leigh Whannel (Adam); Danny Glover (Detective Tapp); Ken Leung (Detective Sing); Tobin Bell (Jigsaw); Dina Meyer (Kerry); Shawnee Smith (Amanda); Monica Potter (Alison Gordon); Makenzie Vega (Diana Gordon); Mike Butters (Paul); Paul Gütthardt (Mark); Michael Emerson (Zep).

CREW: Lionsgate Films, Evolution Entertainment and Twisted Pictures presents *Saw*. Casting: Amy Lippens. Costume Designer: Jennifer L. Soulages. Production Designer: Julie Berghoff. Music: Charlie Clouser. Director of Photography: David A. Armstrong. Film Editor: Kevin Greutert. Producers: Gregg Hoffman, Oren Koules. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Jason Constantine, Stacey Testro. Story by: James Wan, Leigh Whannel. Written by: Leigh Whannel. Directed by: James Wan. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 103 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two men, a voyeur named Adam and a surgeon, Dr. Lawrence Gordon (Elwes), awaken unexpectedly in a filthy bathroom, their feet shackled, and a bloody—but armed—corpse laying between them. They soon find that they are actually unwitting contestants in a sadistic game played by a

boogeyman chess player called The Jigsaw Killer. They soon realize, however, that the game is not about their captor, or even his strict rules ... but rather about their own histories, their own sins. Jigsaw has left tapes, and players for the two contestants. Dr. Gordon learns that his wife and daughter have been kidnapped and will die, unless he murders Adam before 6:00 p.m.

COMMENTARY: *Saw* is the movie that launched a thousand ships, or less colorfully, the movie that launched a franchise and a sub-genre known, not very affectionately in some quarters, as torture porn. Going back to *Saw* today, one can parse its cinematic virtues as a crafty and innovative development of the serial killer cinema, a new spin on that popular 1990s silver screen boogeyman, right down to the police procedural aspect of the tale. The 2000s era twist, however, is that in the *Saw* films the serial killer doesn't do the actual murdering; he (or she, in some entries), makes the victims kill themselves, and, further, always gives them a choice in the matter. Much in the same way that *Final Destination* films are organized as a series of murderous set pieces with Death as the invisible hand or perpetrator, the *Saw* movies depict gruesome "tests" where the puppet master is heard on tape, and sometimes seen as a weird puppet, but otherwise, not committing the bloody crime.

This is something new, and a development of both the slasher and serial killer paradigms. In the 2000s the killer in these films is omnipotent, in a fashion, as either Death or Jigsaw, but not present on location in the traditional sense. Why did this idea take such flight in the first decade of the 21st century? The most readily answer is the War on Terror and the 9/11 attacks. Again. Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind of the terror attacks of 2001, became a potent boogeyman to Americans, an unseen menace, a puppet master who would appear, disappear, attack, and then resurface, notably on videotape. There was no respite from him, in a sense. He had rented space in the American subconscious after 9/11. The *Saw* movies, especially, offer a boogeyman who acts in the same fashion. And like Osama Bin Laden, the concept of blowback is at work in the behavior of Jigsaw, or John Kramer. He offers his test subjects, his game players, the chance to right a wrong in their lives. They can overcome that bad decision, by making another tough decision (like cutting off a foot at the ankle), but there are costs. Nothing will come easy.

Conversely, one might view *Saw* and its progeny as a twisted reflection of the TV of the era. In the 2000s, both game/quiz shows (which put viewers to the test, to win or lose a contest), and reality shows (which humiliated contestants with tests designed to break them, or their relationships), were incredibly popular. Some involved contestants or players subjected to really disgusting punishments. The *Saw* films are, simply, one step beyond, and a reflection of reality show culture.

Although critics were quick to gripe about the level of violence (and on-screen grue) in the *Saw* films, the fact is they all bear a strong moral stamp. They concern making moral choices in a life and death situation. Would you cut off your own foot to save your family? Or would you choose yourself and preserve your body? Again, it's easy to look at this choice as a commentary on policy blowback in the War on Terror Age. What are the repercussions for a pre-emptive war? What happens when you treat prisoners of war inhumanely? What domestic problems are ignored so the War on Terror can be prosecuted? America possesses limited resources, and in a very real sense must decide whether it cuts off its own foot, in the maintenance of its empire and world eminence.

The first *Saw* movie is undeniably the smartest and best of the series. In part, it is because of the film's structure. The movie begins with just two characters trapped in a filthy bathroom. The two characters, Adam and Dr. Gordon, are then forced to learn about each other as they play Jigsaw's game. This process of learning requires ever larger circles of flashbacks, and flashbacks within flashbacks (a concept popular in the decade of the 2000s, and also see in such films as John Carpenter's *Ghosts of Mars*). Later films possess more straightforward, less labyrinthian plotting, but lose some of the mystery and surprise of *Saw*. The climactic moment when it is revealed that Jigsaw has been among his game players since the film's opening seconds, is a psychic blast that forces an instant and thorough re-contextualization of every plot turn the audience knows. It is just one storytelling masterstroke in a film of innumerable twists and turns,

For some critics, the *Saw* films might also be viewed as simply a collection of very inventive murders, utilizing torture contraptions and scenarios that truly terrify. Here, Amanda is forced to escape from a byzantine-looking helmet, called “the reverse bear trap.” If she cannot unlock it within sixty seconds, the trap will spring over her mouth, and rip her jaw clean off. To unlock it, however, she must use a knife to find the key ... which is in the abdomen of another game player. It is gruesome, to be sure, but also in a way that disturbs the psyche, or imagination. Amanda escapes the trap and becomes a Jigsaw acolyte, but the power of the scene is in her desperation, the ticking clock, and the fact that the audience imagines the trap springing on her jaw, but never sees it. If the *Saw* movies feature a distinctive weakness it is that as they go on, the victims aren’t always well-selected, and the paradigm shifts so that the movies linger on those who don’t escape the traps, and the worst happens. The real terror happens in the audience’s mind, but the *Saw* movies eventually forget that to depict every manner of horror is unimaginable.

If the first *Saw* features any weakness it is that, at a crucial point, it doesn’t trust the audience enough to keep up with its twists and turns. There is one flashback too many, perhaps, that shows the audience things it already knows and remembers. That is just about the only miscalculation in the whole affair. The rest of the time, the film’s makers are clearly playing nine-dimensional chess, moving in ways of surprising complexity, and even artistic symbolism. For example, consider one scene involving Dr. Gordon. His daughter, Diana, has had a nightmare, and he goes to her bedroom to comfort her. He grabs her by a foot and counts her toe playfully, doing that “little piggies” game that all parents play with their kids. It seems like an innocent, unimportant moment. But then, of course, consider Gordon’s fate. Determined to rescue his daughter again, he cuts off one of his feet in that bathroom, with a rusty saw. He cuts off all his little piggies, to save Diana’s. The two scenes connect in an almost subconscious fashion, but one that suggests the movie’s writer and director have planned every last detail as assiduously as Jigsaw plans his twisted games.

On a pure human level, *Saw* asks its audience to appreciate life. John Kramer is dying of an inoperable brain tumor and has no more life left. He makes it his mission to help the broken people—the addicts, the unfaithful, the pathological—and reconsider their lives. They are ungrateful for what they have, and by making them play his games, they do undergo a kind of catharsis, or apotheosis. They realize how precious life is. Again, this is not something that Americans were unaware of after 9/11. A confused and scared people were asking why their loved ones had died, and what they could do protect themselves now. In doing so, they also had to ask what they were willing to sacrifice. Was it okay to surveil them without warrants? Was it okay to torture prisoners in their names? Was it okay to live under a system of color-coded terror threats? Was it okay to attack a nation that had not attacked us?

The *Saw* movies remind audiences that no one is getting out of this decade completely whole. It’s going to cost us something to make the tough choices.

Secret Window * * *

Critical Reception

“King’s meditation on the dark forces at work in a writer’s imagination makes for a sometimes tense but ultimately gimmicky film, a reckoning of the conscious and subconscious minds of a writer whose predicament leads filmgoers up a garden path before its grisly finale.”—Deborah Hornblow, *The Hartford Courant*: “Depp Lost in Woods of King’s ‘Window,’” March 12, 2004.

“*Secret Window* is one of those movies that’s pretty easy to pick apart once you’ve seen it, and it’s ultimately not as smart as its snappy first half hour leads you to hope. The last 20 minutes, in particular, really fall apart; despite the presence of a ‘redrum’ moment reminiscent of *The Shining*, you leave with a shrug rather than a shiver. But up to the end, the movie has a crisp, brisk style to it, and it’s a pleasure to watch Depp, with his seared-out blondish hair (Mort has highlights he clearly got tired of maintaining) and amused eyes, finding this character.”—Moir MacDonal, *The Seattle Times*: “Depp’s Charisma Makes ‘Secret Window’ Worth a

Look,” March 12, 2004.

“Not quite as horrific as, say, *Cujo*, the new thriller has glimpses of *Misery* and shards of *Shawshank Redemption*, but it’s hardly an entry on any ‘don’t miss’ list. That’s because the film doesn’t unfold as cleverly as it could. It also doesn’t have the plot twists that add up to a real ‘a-ha!’ moment. It’s like an atmospheric book without a plot.”—Bruce R. Miller, *Sioux City Journal*: “*Secret Window* more atmosphere than plot,” March 19, 2004.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Johnny Depp (Mort Rainey); John Turturro (John Shooter); Maria Bello (Amy Rainey); Timothy Hutton (Ted Milner); Charles S. Dutton (Ken Karsch); Len Cariou (Sheriff Newsome); John Heney (Mrs. Garvey); John Dunn Hill (Tom Greenleaf); Vlasta Vrana (Wickersham); Matt Holland (Detective Bradley); Gillian Ferrabee (Fran Eveans); Bronwen Mantel (Greta); Elizabeth Marleau (Juliet); Kyle Allatt (Busboy).

CREW: Columbia Pictures, Grand Slam Productions, and Pariah Entertainment Group presents *Secret Window*. Casting: Pat McCorkle, John Papsidera. Production Designer: Howard Cummings. Costume Design: Odette Gadoury. Special Effects: Maestro FX, Lifemaker Inc., Gray Matter FX, Intrigue. Music: Philip Glass, Geoff Zanelli. Director of Photography: Fred Murphy. Film Editing: Jill Savidd. Producer: Gavin Polone. Executive Producer: Ezra Swerdlow. Based on the novel *Secret Window*, *Secret Garden* by Stephen King. Written and Directed by: David Koepp. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Six months after he was discovered cheating on his wife, writer Mort Rainey (Depp) is accused of plagiarism by a creepy stranger, John Shooter (Turturro). As Mort attempts to clear his name regarding the like stories, “*Secret Window*” and “*Sowing Season*,” respectively, he finds it more and more difficult to do so. The stranger grows more adamant in his assertions, and Mort grows ever more paranoid about the true nature of his story, and his relationship with his wife, Amy (Bello).

COMMENTARY: With *Secret Window*, the oeuvre of Stephen King fares much better than it did with the dreadful 2003 film, *Dreamcatcher*. That film was all over the place, and *Secret Window* is, as if by design, a buttoned-down film, featuring few characters, and few settings. This simple, clean and direct material allows director David Koepp to focus on the essentials and he crafts a paranoid, involving film here, one ably assisted by a terrific central performance from Johnny Depp.

Secret Window is an adaptation of a novella in the omnibus *Four Past Midnight*, which was published in 1990. The story adapts, relatively faithfully, “*Secret Window*, *Secret Garden*.” The inspiration for King’s story was apparently plagiarism accusations from fans, all of which, over time, were proven false. This focus on a writer as a central character may also bring to mind *The Dark Half* (1991), and the George A. Romero film adaptation. Both stories revolve around a writer’s creative imagination, and the crisis it creates for him. In *The Dark Half*, an author grapples with a *nom de plume* that has become real, and violent. The answer to his creation revolves around the supernatural, or at least quasi-supernatural, a half-formed “twin.” *Secret Window* focuses on accusations of plagiarism from a schizophrenic author’s alter-ego or id, and the resolution of the crisis, such as it is, involves psychology, explicitly. Simply put, Mort Rainey is insane. Intriguingly, Timothy Hutton, who played the imperiled author in *The Dark Half*, also appears in *Secret Window*, in a supporting role.



A portrait of a writer in distress. Johnny Depp is Mort Rainey in *Secret Window* (2004).

A plagiarism accusation is something that every author fears and dreads. There are few protections against it, and an author can be smeared online, or in the press, without having access to a fair hearing. That is the literal interpretation of the film's narrative. The story is about Mort, who actually bears guilt for plagiarizing, and the way his conscience manifests this guilt. In the end, he is driven to murder, and apparently gets away with it. But the film is structured in such a way that Mort's problems are not presented in a straightforward fashion. He is an unreliable narrator, and he crafts an alternate reality for the audience, one in which he dwells, and in which the audience dwells, until it all comes crashing down.

Although the novella was written in 1990, the adaptation is certainly timely in 2004, an election year during the War on Terror. What was and remains so disturbing about this time for many Americans is the way in which the Bush Administration, supported by Fox News, crafted its own alternate reality, which people believed, at least for several years. This attempt to create an alternative reality, outside of concrete, objective fact, was, perhaps, the defining crisis of the Bush years. The Administration lied about the reasons for the Iraq War. It told the American people that Hussein would not allow weapon inspectors into the country, but they were allowed into the country. It told the American populace that Americans would be greeted as liberators. Americans were not greeted as liberators. The Administration had President Bush land on an aircraft carrier and declare "Mission: Accomplished" in May of 2003, but the mission was not accomplished, and at the time of this book's writing, there was still an American military presence in Iraq. The Administration promised later that the insurgency in Iraq was in its last throes, and that the war was turning a corner. Those statements were also not true. Later in the decade, after Bush's departure, candidate John McCain noted that "*the fundamentals of the economy are strong*." But the economy collapsed, and the Great Recession began. In all these situations, leaders were too cowardly to tell the American populace the truth about how bad things were. Instead, they created fictional narratives, devoid of truth, and sold them via their favorite news organ, Fox. American leaders were, like Mort Rainey, unreliable narrators. In some weird way, *Secret Garden* is all about this truth that the narrative told by the protagonist is faulty, incorrect, and, in fact, dangerous, given facts on the ground. Rainey attempts to live in his own false narrative but keeps finding that others won't conform to his alternative facts. What happens to those who won't accept his version of reality? He kills them.



Mort Rainey (Johnny Depp) eliminates the evidence of a crime in *Secret Window* (2004).

In Mort's world, his wife shared on him, and he is blameless. In his world, he did not plagiarize another author's story. In his reality, he is not a murderer. Rather, he is the victim. This is all a crazy brand of projection. In fact, Mort is culpable in all the failures of his life, and only his violence (and his persistence in believing in alternate facts) keeps him going. *Secret Window* is therefore about what occurs when delusion becomes policy, when fantasy replaces fact. In America this was happening on a national scale, not merely a personal one in the 2000s.

Technically, *Secret Window* is tight and taut, with a cloying sense of claustrophobia as the noose of reality tightens around Mort Rainey. His carefully constructed narrative, even to audiences, feels preferable to the alternative, even as it comes crashing down. The audience wants to believe Mort, for as long as possible, until he becomes murderous. Again, this approach can easily be interpreted as one that plagued America. Everyone wanted to believe the President, and his people, even after one lie and one dissemination after the other was revealed. To reckon with the lie was a crisis worse, for many, than living and repeating it.

Seed of Chucky * * *

Critical Reception

"*Seed of Chucky* is lowbrow junk with a pulse, stuffed plump with references to its ancestors from *Halloween* to *Psycho* to *The Shining*. Chucky himself, despite the vocal exertions of the amused-sounding Brad Dourif, is as monotonously nihilistic as usual, a cackling doll-face with an appetite for destruction. The cleverly designed Tiffany is another story; she's the best thing to happen to this franchise, and with Tilly speaking her lines she's a demented mix of hellraising and nurturing. In the flesh, Tilly has fun sending herself up, bemoaning her career choices, taking a couple of shots at Julia Roberts, and winking at fans of what's likely to be her headstone movie, *Bound* (there's a wonderfully crass Gina Gershon joke, too)."—Rob Gonsalves, *EFilmCritic*, January 4, 2007.

"Good pacing and an alternative look at family values through the eyes of a maniacal family, that happens to be two feet tall, makes fun, but forgettable, viewing."—Darren Amner, *Eye for Film*, May 16, 2005.

"*Seed of Chucky* is actually two movies, one wretched, the other funny. The funny one involves the Jennifer Tilly scenes. She plays 'herself' in the movie—a horror film star making *Chucky Goes Psycho* and little realizing that both the Chucky doll and its wife the Jennifer doll have been brought back to life by the Glen or Glenda doll, their child."—Roger Ebert, *RogerEbert.com*, November 11, 2004.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Brad Dourif (Chucky); Jennifer Tilly (Herself/Tiffany); Billy Boyd (Glen/Glenda); Redman (Redman); Hannah Spearritt (Joan); John Waters (Pete Peters); Keith-Lee Castgle (Psychs); Steve Lawton (Stan); Tony Gardner (Himself); Jason Flemyng (Santa); Nicholas Rowe (Lawyer); Stephanie Chambers (Claudia's Mum); Simon James Morgan (Claudia's Dad); Bethany Simons-Denville (Claudia); Rebecca Santos (Fulvia); Beans El-Balawi (Human Glen); Kristina Hewitt (Huan Glenda).

CREW: Focus Features, Rogue Pictures, David Kirschner Productions, Castel Film Romania and La Sienaga Productions present *Seed of Chucky*. Casting: Kate Planting. Costume Designer: Oana Paunescu. Special Effects: Alterian, Stargate Studios, Lipsync Post, Special Effects UK. Music: Pino Donaggio. Director of Photography: Vernon Layton. Film Editor: Chris Dickens. Producers: David Kirschner, Corey Sienna. Based on characters created by: Dan Mancini. Written and Directed by: Dan Mancini. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A strange non-gendered doll, Glen/Glenda (Boyd), seeks their true identity. Glen/Glenda finds that they were parented by the killer doll, Chucky (Dourif) and his sometimes girlfriend doll, Tiffany (Tilly). Glen/Glenda makes their way to Hollywood, where Chucky wants to them to follow in

the family line: murder. Tiffany, meanwhile, wants to be reborn in the body of actress Jennifer Tilly (Herself), who is auditioning to play the Virgin Mary in a religious movie hoping to cash in on the success of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*.

COMMENTARY: What would any modern decade be without at least one Chucky movie? And the 2000s gets the craziest, most inventive, and perhaps best Chucky movie since the 1988 original, *Child's Play*. *Seed of Chucky* is an over-the-top horror film about family, acceptance, and gender identity. Only it happens to star murderous dolls. And it also lampoons Hollywood in ways perhaps more cogent and cleverer than *Scream 3*'s similar effort.

Seed of Chucky may not be widely loved by mainstream horror films or Chucky aficionados, and that fact likely goes back to a decision made about the nature of this sequel, the fifth in a line of seven, and still counting. Instead of creating yet another straight-forward killer doll movie, the creators here made something smarter and better. They made a killer doll film that leans into its comedy and is actually about something other than gore and murder. Make no mistake, however, the gore and murders are still here to enjoy and appreciate.

Seed of Chucky introduces Glen/Glenda, a doll seeking their identity, and trying to determine if that identity comes from the past, and genetics, or from choice and a knowledge of self. "*Sometimes I feel like a boy. Sometimes I feel like a girl,*" Glen/Glenda notes at one point, seeking acceptance, despite the fact that Tiffany wants her child to be a girl, and refers to them as such, while Chucky wants Glen to be both a boy, and a murderer, following in the Old Man's footsteps. Long time horror fans will recognize immediately, the Glen/Glenda dynamic from a film with a similar name, Ed Wood's 1953 paean to transsexuality, *Glen or Glenda*. The film's argument is that identity is not determined by the needs of others, even if they are your parents, or by genitals, or even by society at large. Rather, identity is about the way someone feels. So, here we are, in 2004, the very year when President George W. Bush was running for re-election on the wedge issue of gay marriage, and the need to save marriage from "activist judges" by defining it as only between being between men and women, and a horror film is arguing for a more fluid approach to gender, and gender issues.

The entire issue is reflected in Chucky's journey in this film, as well. Glen/Glenda wants the freedom—which Americans are supposed to be all about in the Age of Terror—to define for him or herself the right to choose who they wish to be, and whom they wish to be acknowledged as in an egalitarian society. For Chucky, that comes down, satirically, his to psychotic behavior. "*It's not a condition, it's a choice,*" Chucky notes about his predilection towards murder. "*And it's not something you should hide in the closet.*"

What Chucky is standing up for his two-fold. First, ironically, his right to murder others; his defining choice in lifestyle. Metaphorically, however, what he argues passionately for is the right for non-normative individuals to define themselves, rather than being defined by outsiders or the state. And again, this is what was at stake at the ballot box in 2004, as President Bush traveled the country arguing for a Constitutional Amendment preventing gay marriage. The cognitive dissonance in the President's approach was staggering. He argued for freedom in the Middle East, for small government and individual choice in the United States, but then sought to prevent gay people from exercising their freedom and choice to marry.

At the same time that *Seed of Chucky* depicts Glen/Glenda as a non-normative individual seeking his/her identity, and being accepted for his/her choices, it absolutely roasts Hollywood, and its superficial values. Jennifer Tilly is told, for instance, that she is "*prostituting*" herself to play "*the Virgin Mary*," a rich turn of events. She wishes to play the most holy of women, according to some beliefs, and believes that the path to doing so is to fuck her way into the role. Similarly, after, the success of *Passion of the Christ*, Hollywood was eager to cash in on religious films, sensing an untapped audience. Religion, by its nature, is supposed to be sincere and heartfelt; but here Hollywood is exposed as simply following the latest cash-cow. In both cases, Hollywood is depicted as saying one thing, and doing something else.

Another trenchant commentary arrives in the film, lampooning horror, specifically. Redman plays

a major role in the film, and he is a rapper, not an actor. But in the 2000s (and a bit in the 1990s too), horror films were recruiting rappers as stars. Busta Rhymes kung-fucked up Michael Myers in *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002), and Snoop Dogg tried his hand as a boogeyman in *Bones* (2002), to name just two other examples. Here Redman, a rapper, is directing the movie about the Virgin Mary, and tries to get in Jennifer Tilly's pants, before Chucky disembowels him.

The film's horror set-pieces are top-notch, both scary and ridiculously funny. For instance, Chucky kills Britney Spears and then quips, after doing so, "*Oops I did it again.*" This is a reference to her pop culture music hit, of course, but is also incorporated into Chucky's journey. He is asked to view horror as an addiction, like drugs, before realizing it is part of his identity. And here, he falls off the path to recovery, hence the notation of "*oops.*"

Even Chucky's first kill of the film is rife with social commentary. He murders Santa Claus. This is an oblique reference to the Moral Majority, a right-wing censorious organization of the 1980s that objected to Santa's presence in horror films like *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984), and also to the rise of boogeymen like Freddy and Chucky. A study in the late 1980s showed that these popular slashers were more well-known to children than a historical figure of Americana, like Abe Lincoln. Santa is the Abe Lincoln stand-in here. Chucky murders a figure who should be more famous than he is but, probably isn't.

The question for the "talking" slashers of the rubber reality era, from Freddy to Chucky, was, can they still be scary if once audiences know all their tricks, and they crack wise so often? There's no doubt that films such as *Seed of Chucky* offer a new approach to the material. Instead of dumbing down its horror, or making the talking killer go silent, *Seed of Chucky* leans into its era with a trenchant social critique of the 2000s homophobia and transphobia as well as of Hollywood superficiality.

The result is the smartest and funniest Chucky film of them all, even if it isn't scary in the way that *Child's Play* proved to be. Sixteen years on from his '80s debut, the ambulatory doll proves he's still got a lot of life left in him.

Shaun of the Dead ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Similar to *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), it's a horror movie that's funny, intelligent—and, yes—horrific, and seamlessly so. And like George A. Romero's 1968 cult classic, *Night of the Living Dead*, and its sequel *Dawn of the Dead* sources of great inspiration for Pegg and director Edgar Wright, who co-wrote the script, it has a certain irresistible B-movie charm."—Christy Lemire, *Today*: "Sly Zombie fun in *Shaun of the Dead*!," September 22, 2004.

"*Shaun of the Dead* could be the perfect movie. While it's a satire of the romantic comedy genre housed in a zombie film, the movie proves that the zombie genre has the capacity to support ALL genres. In an hour and 40 minutes, *Shaun of the Dead* confirms it can be a romantic comedy, satire, zombie film, buddy comedy, action film, tragedy, tale of redemption and the start of a trilogy."—Jeff Ramos, *Polygon*, October 31, 2016.

"This is one of my 10 favorite films of all time. A comedy that is legitimately terrifying. A horror film that is side-splittingly hilarious. True, *Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn* spliced the horror and comedy genres together, but that film was gonzo splat-stick. *Shaun of the Dead*'s humor, though sophomoric, is edgy and sophisticated. Behold the introduction of a new master of cinema: Edgar Wright. Wright keeps delighting audiences with his oddball films. (Even his trailer in *Grindhouse* steals the show from Richard Rodriguez, Quentin Tarantino and Rob Zombie.) One wonders if Wright and co-writer/star Simon Pegg named the mother Barbara just to gleefully spoof George Romero with the line 'We're coming to get you, Barbara.' British audiences may have already known Pegg and the Hardy to his Laurel, Nick Frost, but the two became hot International talents after this film."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Simon Pegg (Shaun); Nick Frost (Ed); Kate Ashfield (Liz); Lucy Davis (Dianne); Dylan Moran (David); Penelope Wilton (Barbara); Bill Nighy (Phillip); Jessica Stevenson (Yvonne); Peter Serfinowicz (Pete); Rafe Spall (Noel); Martin Freeman (Declan); Reece Shearsmith (Mark); Tasmin Greig (Maggie); Julia Deakin (Yvonne's Mum); Matt Lucas (Tom).

CREW: Rogue Pictures, Studio Canal, WT² Productions presents *Shaun of the Dead*. Music: Pete Woodhead, Daniel Mudford. Director of Photography: David M. Dunlap. Film Editor: Chris Dickens. Producer: Nira Park. Written by: Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg. Directed by: Edgar Wright. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Shaun (Pegg) is devastated when his girlfriend of three years, Liz (Ashfield), breaks up with him on their three-year anniversary. She is concerned he has no plan for his life and is going nowhere. Shaun's best buddy, Ed (Frost), assures Shaun that losing Liz is no big deal, but he's part of Shaun's problem since Ed himself has no plan for his life except going to the pub and drinking. Before Shaun can make things right with Liz, a zombie apocalypse occurs, and he must test his mettle to rescue not only Liz, but his mother, Barbara (Wilton), from the flesh-eating monsters. In a series of increasingly tense and difficult battles for survival, Shaun ultimately finds his voice and his spine, and becomes someone whom Liz can admire, and would like to spend her life with.

COMMENTARY: Comedy horror, or horror comedy? An example of the former might be a title like the decade's *Scary Movie* (2000) or the classic *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948); movies that go for laughs first, at the expense of screams. The delightful, if ultra-gory *Shaun of the Dead* fits nicely in the latter camp, like those great efforts of the 1980s such as *Fright Night* (1985) or *Return of the Living Dead* (1985). Those efforts remain scary, but also, at the same time, make one smile, or laugh. The fact that the zombie-themed *Shaun of the Dead* is highly-amusing as well as grotesque (and tense, at times), renders the film a standout experience in the 2000s, by-and-large a decade of grim, ultra-serious horror films.

Indeed, in a decade of ponderous J-Horrors, grueling and humorless remakes of classics, and transgressive torture porn efforts something light and breezy really stands out. But Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg have crafted an artistic horror film that does something beyond merely tickling the funny bone (or highlighting some really gory effects). Specifically, *Shaun of the Dead* finds a new and timely reading or interpretation for the zombie, the most popular monster of the 2000s.



Gen X Zombies: The cast of *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), from left to right: David (Dylan Morgan), Kate Ashfield (Liz), Shaun (Simon Pegg) and Dianne (Lucy Davis).

The zombies in *Shaun of the Dead* are all people who might be said to live their lives unquestioningly, without awareness, and without seeking improvement. Thus, a zombie is that plodding guy who gets up, buys a coffee, goes to work, and undertakes that ritual without thinking, without growing, or without reflection. Or a zombie may be a developmentally arrested man-child who doesn't have a partner and lives in an eternal world of video games and delivery pizza.

The title, *Shaun of the Dead* plays, of course, on *Dawn of the Dead*, but it also carries a literal meaning. Shaun could be of “*the dead*,” too, just like Ed is. If he doesn't change his life, if he doesn't wake up from his routine, he'll be a zombie too. If he doesn't grow up, pursue a career, and at least try to be an adult, he's every bit “*the dead*” of the movie's moniker: unchanging, and stagnant.

George A. Romero imagined his zombies, in *Dawn of the Dead*, as conspicuous consumers, breaking down doors at the mall to get inside and feed their appetites. In the 21st century, *Shaun of the Dead*'s commentary is just as valuable, but of a different sort. Here, in 2004, Shaun lives in a world in which wages have been stagnant, the middle class is shrinking all over the world, and smart, educated guys like him have no choice but to work dead end jobs to make ends meet. At this juncture, we tend to infantilize our children, so that growing up takes longer, and by the same token, have many broken families. Video games, movies, and music are our perennial escapes from the difficulties of the family, and the difficulties of the economy.

Shaun of the Dead finds its stride right at the start, as it carefully observes life for a series of young, aimless, directionless characters both before and during the zombie apocalypse. Through this careful observation, the film concludes that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Specifically, *Shaun of the Dead* suggests that zombies already walk among us. They go to the pub every night, get hammered, and try to make it through their 9-to-5 drudgery. They are not awake to the fact that they are shambling drones, unfulfilled and “hungry,” not for brains but for a way of out the system (capitalism) that makes slaves or zombies of everyone. To dramatize this world, the opening sequence in *Shaun of the Dead* showcases average people quietly getting up to go work, but in emotionally and mentally checked-out terms. Hardly anyone makes eye contact with anyone else. And Shaun's long yawn of boredom could easily be mistaken for a zombie's moan. Following the zombie apocalypse, Wright knowingly re-stages the film's inaugural tracking shot—this time featuring actual zombies, not just bored, checked out humans.

And Shaun doesn't even notice the difference.

Again, to hark back to the George A. Romero living dead films, the sometimes not-too-subtle point is that the zombies are “us.” The makers of this film have understood that on a deep level and mine humor from that fact. In *Shaun of the Dead*, the point is that many humans live their daily lives as if already zombies. One of the movie's many running gags, involving the observation (of Shaun) that “*you've got red on you*”—expresses the idea that things tend to stay the same. At first, he's got red ink on his white shirt. Later, it's spilled blood. The zombie apocalypse has changed less about his life than one might suspect. He's still the same old slob, trying to figure out how to not live his whole life as a drone, or a zombie. The zombie, the film observes, is the perfect employee, after all, for “*the service industry*.”

Shaun of the Dead is smart in myriad ways beyond its reparsing of the zombie monster for the 21st century. It is a highly knowing, self-reflexive film that pays homage to the horror movies (and particularly zombie movies) of yesterday. When embarking to rescue Shaun's mother, for instance, Ed states “*We're coming to get you, Barbara*,” thus reciting Johnny's notorious line from the first scene of 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* (“*They're coming to get you, Barbara*.”)

At another point, a character implores another to “*Join us*,” adopting the common phraseology of the *Evil Dead*'s deadites. *Shaun of the Dead* also features characters named Ken Foree and Ash. Those are the names, respectively, of an actor who fought zombies in *Dawn of the Dead*, and a character who did the same (the lead character of *The Evil Dead*.) These moments of homage are great fun for horror fans but not necessary to know for an enjoyment of the film, or its humor.

It would be tough to deny that *Shaun of the Dead* brandishes its sharpest cuts for geekdom, the very people who would most be drawn to this film, and who would catch and relish all the references above. Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright are geeks themselves, and so they can make these observations

without cruelty; even while being true about them. Shaun and Ed live in a world of fart jokes, junk food, video games, non-stop movie references and petty grievances about life. They are Generation X, like this author, and so there is an element of self-recognition here. Generation X'ers are a small generation, individuals born between the years 1965 and 1980, and have been termed "*financially screwed*" because they possess the highest amount of debt of any living generation. As was noted in the MetLife Study of Generation X:

Positive portrayals of Generation X have tended to revolve around their individualism, independence, proficiency with technology and high levels of education. They are arguably better educated than any generation before them. This study found almost half of Gen Xers grew up in homes where both parents worked and almost two in 10 grew up in single parent households. Perhaps this "latch-key kids" phenomenon coupled with their experience as the first generation to grow up with computers spawned Gen Xers fierce self-reliance, desire for freedom, techie tendencies and focus on entertainment.¹³

That bit of data fits in well with the characters as depicted in *Shaun of the Dead*. The focus on entertainment (video games, movies), is part of the fun here, as is the character's sense of individualism, and the fact that many come from households with just one parent. Finally, the fact that this generation is over-educated adds to the meaninglessness of life (the central zombie metaphor of the film). Shaun is smart, resourceful and knowledgeable, but he works a job that does not require him to utilize any of those skills.

By successfully navigating Z-Day (the Zombie Day), Shaun finally establishes his independence from parents and juvenile best buddy. He has moved his buddy Ed, now a zombie, into an appropriately limited compartment of his life (in the garden shed, to be precise) rather than let that aspect of his life dominate his grown-up relationship with Liz. In doing so, Shaun, and by extension, Generation X, begin the process of really becoming "*grown-ups*" in this self-reflexive movie. Or, in the vernacular of the film, Shaun's job is to "*sort*" his "*fucking life out*." Liz tells him what he must do. He promised her that "*things would change*" and that he would grow up. With a bit of assistance from Z-Day, that's what Shaun does.

Beyond its redefinition of the zombie for the 2000s and Generation X, *Shaun of the Dead* is utterly brilliant in terms of its execution. A zombie battle is amusingly choreographed to music from Queen, and the film impresses with its sense of pace and nimble humor. The important thing, however, is that no matter how hard one laughs with the film's joke, the filmmakers also get right the scary, gory sequences. The horror scenes, with zombies invading the Winchester Pub, for instance, are actually suspenseful (and quite much gorier than one might expect). No matter the humor, *Shaun of the Dead* never loses sight of the fact that there are life and death consequences for Shaun and his friends should they fail to adequately put up a fight.

Between *Shaun of the Dead* and *Zombieland*, the 2000s truly proved that zombies were all-purpose monsters, able to carry social commentary about growing up, social anxiety, and other fascinating topics. George A. Romero must have been proud to see his favorite silver screen ghoul become something so versatile.

Shutter ★ ★ ★

Cast & Crew

CAST: Ananda Everingham (Tun); Natthaweenranuch Thongmee (Jane); Achita Sikamana (Natre); Unnop Chanpaibool (Tonn); Titikarn Tongprasearth (Jim); Sivogorn Muttamara (Meng); Chachchaya Chalempol (Tonn's Wife); Kachormsa Naruepatr (Tee) Apichart Chusakul (Editor).

CREW: GMM Pictures Co., and Phenomena Motion Pictures present *Shutter*. Casting: Panjai Sirisuwan. Costume Designer: Phacharaphan Sathitrachot. Music: Chatchai Pongprapaphan. Director of Photography: Niramon Ross. Film Editors: Manop Boonwipat, Lee Chatametkool. Producer: Yodphet Susawad. Executive Producers: Paiboon Damrongchaitham, Boosaba Daorueng. Written by: Parkpoom Wongpoom, Banjong Pisanthanakun, Sophon Sakdaphisit. Directed by: Banjong Pisanthanakun, Parkpoom Wongpoom. M.P.A.A. Rating: NR. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Jane (Thongmeemee) and Tun (Everingham) are deeply in love, at least until a strange incident. They accidentally run over a woman on the road, after drinking at a friend's party. They leave the victim on the road. Later, they are haunted by a ghost, presumably of their victim. They also keep seeing weird white blotches on their photographs. However, as Jane investigates spirit photography and Tun begins to complain of neck pain, Jane learns that her boyfriend's association with the victim goes back further. In fact, he dated her, Natre (Sikamana), in college. Soon, Tun's friends begin committing suicide, and Jane investigates Natre's family.

COMMENTARY: This Thai horror film covers much of the same "J-Horror" territory (or more accurately, Asian horror) as films like *The Ring* (2002). Only in this case, the technology that a spectral avenger uses to communicate with the living is not videotape, but film. The movie is actually a fascinating treatise, at least for a while, on the "science" (!) of spirit photography. A point of controversy, reported frequently in the press at the time of the film's release, is that the photographs utilized in the film are, apparently, real.

But, beyond that factoid, *Shutter* clearly qualifies as one of the many "Men Behaving Badly" horror movies of the 2000s. The investigation into the ghost reveals wrongdoing on the part of Tun, and also his friends. Tun did not stop his buddies from raping Natre, his former girlfriend, and in fact, he filmed the entire event. Tun carries this weight, literally. After the car accident his body weight doubles, because Natre's spirit is physically sitting on his neck, an unmovable albatross of sorts.

The big question of the film is one asked of Tun. "*How could you let it happen?*" How could he stand by and watch someone that he was once close with get raped? This angle is played up even more successfully in the American 2008 remake. Here, there is still a bit of male bias going on, at times. For instance, there is a scene of a grasshopper on television. A female eats a male's head, and by inference, one is supposed to understand that this is what Natre is doing to Tun.

But is Natre really the bad one?

The film also seems to let Tun off the hook a little by the explanation of spirits. "*Sometimes, spirits just want to be close to their loved ones.*" If that is the case for Natre, then she has attached herself to Tun not out of the need for justice or vengeance for his bad behavior, but because she still loves him.

Another key difference between versions of *Shutter* occurs in the first act car accident. In this film, Jane is driving, and she hits Natre on the road. However, she and Tun drive away without helping her. In the remake, the ghost simply vanishes. But here, Jane is ultimately responsible for the same crime that Tun is, actually. She sees a crime and looks away; she doesn't do anything to help. As for Tun, he has now participated in a criminal act against Natre twice. "*You're pretending nothing happened,*" Jane says of Tun, following the car accident.

Exactly. He's good at that.

Shutter also features more detail about the relationship between Tun and Natre than the American remake provides about Ben and Megumi. The viewer sees more of their lives together here, which makes Tun's betrayal all the more hurtful. On the other hand, in the American version, the viewer, sees only enough of Megumi and Ben together to realize what an a-hole he is, which perhaps makes the same point, in a different way. Still, this version of the material also provides a deeper look at the avenger, in this case Natre. She is a quiet but kind person, one who seems very sweet. At one point in the action, she jumps on Tun's back, following intercourse with him (and he ignores her). This is a nice foreshadowing of the film's final imagery, showing that she will always be on his back.

Regardless, *Shutter* approaches an idea of importance and value. The wronged victim, Natre, doesn't kill Tun. He must live with her on his shoulders, and that means living with an acknowledgment of what he has done, and what his true character is. Again, this seems a metaphor for how cases of rape and abuse often play out in the press and in our legal systems. Although many perpetrators are not punished, legally, the victim's name becomes attached to their future careers, and projects, riding their backs as it were. The law may not stop these men, but their names are blemished, and their victims' names travel with them, wherever they go ... just as it should be.

Shutter is an oddity in another way. It is a Thai movie, remade in America, but set in Japan, to more closely align it, perhaps, with the J-Horror trend. The film also was remade in 2007 in India, as *Sivi*.

Toolbox Murders * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Angela Bettis (Nell Barrows); Brent Roam (Steven Barrows); Sheri Moon Zombie (Daisy Rain); Marco Rodriguez (Luis Saucedo); Rance Howard (Chas Rooker); Juliet Landau (Julia Cunningham); Adam Gierasch (Ned Lundy); Greg Travis (Byron); Chris Doyle (Coffin Baby); Adam Weisman (Austin); Christina Venuti (Jennifer); Sara Downing (Saffron); Jamison Reeves (Hudson); Stephanie Silverman (Dora); Allan Polonsky (Philip).

CREW: Lions Gate Films, Toolbox Films, Alpine Pictures in association with Scary Movies LLC presents *Toolbox Murders*. Casting: Mark Sikes. Costume Designer: Shon LeBlanc. Production Designer: Yuda Acco. Music: Joseph Conlan. Director of Photography: Steve Yedlin. Film Editor: Andrew Cohen. Producers: Tony DiDio, Gary LaPote, Terence S. Potter, Jacqueline Quella. Executive Producers: Ryan Carroll, Ronnie Truss, Mark Wooding. Written by: Adam Gierasch, Jace Anderson. Directed by: Tobe Hooper. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A married couple, a teacher and doctor, move into the dilapidated Lusman Arms apartment building in Los Angeles, where a series of brutal murders happen to be occurring. The most recent victim is a woman battered to death with a hammer, Daisy Rain (Zombie). The teacher, Nell (Bettis), investigates the crime as she settles in and learns from an elderly neighbor of the building's history as a getaway for Hollywood's stars of yesteryear. As she digs, she finds evidence of a secret infrastructure to the old building, including secret rooms and also secret identities. Soon, she and her husband run afoul of a strange resident, the monstrous Coffin Baby (Doyle).

COMMENTARY: The 1979 film *The Toolbox Murders* is often reviled as a misogynistic, opportunistic and exploitative slasher film from the heyday of that form. The 2004 remake doesn't so much re-tell the story as fashion an entirely new one in a similar setting, a Los Angeles apartment building. Fortunately, the film's director, Tobe Hooper, approaches every film project sideways; not from any expected or predictable tangents. This facet of his art makes his work not only surprising and dangerous feeling, actually, but often quite original.

One of Hooper's key thematic concerns across his career is the juxtaposition of the surface world and the "beneath" world, and *Toolbox Murders* fits that concept in a way more successful (and less laughable) way than his other exploration of the topic in the 2000s, *Mortuary*. In *Eaten Alive at a Chainsaw Massacre: The Films of Tobe Hooper* (2001), I referred to the concept as "The World Underneath," and it appears thematically in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), with the above world as rural Texas and the barbecue stand and the Underneath as the Cannibal Farmhouse. The Backwater Everglades are the normal world of *Eaten Alive* (1976), but the Starlight Hotel is the underneath. In *The Funhouse*, suburban America is the normal, and the Carnival the twisted underground. Again, and again this recurs in Hooper's oeuvre, even in adapted works such as *Salem's Lot* (1979), where the Marsten House represents the underneath in the Maine town of Jerusalem's Lot. *Toolbox Murder* offers a fascinating variation on this duality, with the Lusman Arms, a historic building in Tinsel Town, representing the surface world while inside, and underneath, is the hellscape territory of Coffin Baby. Here, the building itself is a character in the drama, one with secret doors, missing rooms, supernatural symbols and more. Not since Craven's *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), has a house's twisted interior

been plumbd for so much terror.

Hooper's other perennial theme is a variation of the *Alice in Wonderland* trope, the idea of a woman falling into a strange and surreal universe. This is related to the World Beneath, but not quite identical. Consider the insane family dinner of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as a variation of the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, for instance, or children like Carol Ann Freeling (*Poltergeist* [1982]) or David (*Invaders from Mars* [1987]) falling into strange other realms with bizarre and frightening denizens. Here, Nell is the surrogate for Alice falling into that scary wonderland.

Another theme in Hooper's canon involves "reflections in evil," two evil characters, one apparently normal (but insidious), the other physically monstrous. We have the barker and the mutant/ monster in *The Funhouse* (1981), Cook and Leatherface in *Chainsaw*, or Straker, the beard, and Barlow, the vampire in *Salem's Lot*. Even the less-than-stellar *The Mangler* (1995) features the apparently human face of evil (Robert Englund's Gartley) and the reflection, the demonic laundry machine. *Toolbox Murders*, at least after a fashion, features the same dynamic, with the (Dead) Lusman, a Hollywood occultist, as the so-called "normal" face in society, and the hideous Coffin Baby, as the dark reflection; the physically monstrous presence of evil.

All of this material works especially well in a film which uses the setting of Hollywood, as it is a place of duality. Hollywood is the land of dreams, and a land of exploitation. It is a place of glitzy surfaces, and under-the-surface desperation, for many. In short, Hooper embodies the duality of Hollywood in the Lusman Arms and its "evil" denizens, and he has used the form of the remake to impress his own fascinations and themes.

Although *Toolbox Murders* doesn't rank with Hooper's classic horrors, he is fortunate to be abetted here by a great cast, led by Angela Bettis. Together, they bring a lot to the game too, and so even though there were myriad production difficulties to contend with (namely, the money ran out...), the film is made more coherent by the efforts of its cast, and by the return to the beloved themes of its director.

This is one of those films that, for this author, hovered between two-and-a-half stars and three stars. You will veer towards the better rating (three stars), I wager, if you are a Hooper aficionado, and have enjoyed his other films. This isn't classic Hooper, but it's a much more suitable vehicle for his brand of genius, than, say, *The Mangler*, or *Night Terrors*.

*Tremors 4: The Legend Begins (DTV) * **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Michael Gross (Hiram Gummer); Sara Botsford (Christine Lord); Billy Drago (Black Hand Kelly); Brent Roam (Juan Pedilla); August Schellenberg (Tecopa); J.E. Freeman (Old Fred); Ming Lo (Pyong Lien Chang); Lydia Look (Lu Wan Chang); Sam Ly (Fu Yien Chang); Neal Kopit (Victor); Sean Moran (Western Union Clerk); Matthew Seth Wilson (Brick Walters); John Dixon (Big Horse Johnson); Dan Lemieux (Stony Walters); Don Ruffin (Soggy); Lou Carlucci (Mine Foreman).

CREW: Stampede Entertainment and Universal Pictures Home Entertainment Present *Tremors 4: The Legend Begins*. Casting: Teri Fiddleman, Shana Landsburg. Production Designer: Simon Dobbin. Costume Designer: Jennifer L. Parsons. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, HimAndI Productions, 4 Ward Productions. Music: Jay Ferguson. Director of Photography: Virgil L. Harper. Film Editing: Harry B. Miller III. Executive Producers: Nancy Roberts, S.S. Wilson. Based on characters by: S.S. Wilson, Brent Maddock, Ron Underwood. Story by: S.S. Wilson, Brent Maddock, Nancy Roberts. Written by: Scott Buck. Directed by: S.S. Wilson. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1889, in the town of Rejection, the local mine, the Bottom Dollar Mine, is closed when an unidentified monster decapitates a miner. The owner of the mine, a milquetoast Easterner, Hiram Gummer (Gross), travels to the Nevada town to sort out the difficulties and he assembles a team of diverse fighters to help take out the monsters, which will one day be known as graboids. During the battles with the beasts, Gummer develops a love of guns, and after the beasts are defeated, he resolves never to tell the world of his combat with these strange “dirt devils.”

COMMENTARY: *Tremors 4: The Legend Begins* is a perfectly average direct-to-video prequel in the long-lived *Tremors* film series. There's nothing particularly exciting or intriguing about this edition of the man vs. beast monster saga, only the fact that the screenwriters undergo contortions to introduce the graboids to an Old West town, and then have the town forget all about them, so continuity with *Tremors* (1990) is not adversely impacted.

By this point in the franchise, Kevin Bacon and Fred Ward are long gone, and Michael Gross is the face of the films. Here, he plays an ancestor of Burt Gummer, the crazed survivalist who, in the original, “*couldn't get penetration, even with the elephant gun.*” One of the film's many ironic conceits is that Gummer's ancestor is afraid of guns and doesn't know how to fight. He's an eastern gentleman and businessman who has to learn his way. The character is a bit of a jerk at first, whose advice to the townsfolk is, “*Anyone can be taken advantage of. And if you can, do.*” But soon he shows he has a heart of gold and the courage to match it

The graboids are smaller in this film than they were in *Tremors*, and some other entries, and they are sometimes rendered with practical effects, and sometimes with CGI, which creates an inconsistent look. And speaking of inconsistencies, the film reports that there is a Native American legend about these subterranean monsters, even though by 1990, no one has ever heard of them, and they need to be named.

Overall, the film is likable, without being particularly thrilling, and it conveys a certain optimism about it that is refreshing in such a dark age for horror. The town of Rejection comes together to fight, and eventually is renamed as the “Perfection” familiar from the entries set in the 20th and 21st century. That perfection is wrought, intriguingly, by a multi-ethnic, diverse team of fighters in this film. The western setting, both in terms of location and time period, allows Gummer to team with a Native American, a Mexican national, and a Chinese woman (an antecedent of Chang, who owns the first

iteration of his market). In this era of renewed xenophobia, *Tremors* presents its team as heroic, and shows how coming together, not fearing one another, solves problems. Of course, this theme is probably unintentionally ironic since the 20th-century Gummer is an extreme-right wing, NRA, anti-government, conspiracy theorist paranoiac.

Tremors 4: The Legend Begins is slow going, and nothing extraordinary. It goes without saying at this point that the franchise is in slow but permanent decline, and therefore victim to lower budgets, and inferior casting and special effects. But, overall, the film is not an embarrassment, and it attempts, at least to have something to say about our world of the 21st century, even though it is set on the frontier at the cusp of the 20th century.

Van Helsing ★ ★

Critical Reception

"You don't have to adore traditional horror movies—both the American classics and the colorful British remakes—to loathe every second of Stephen Sommers' *Van Helsing* (Universal). But it helps. It helps to know the movies that this giftless writer-director is ripping off to appreciate how little he brings to the party. We live in an era rich in genre pastiches, but filmmakers like Tim Burton (*Sleepy Hollow*), Peter Jackson (*Lord of the Rings*), Quentin Tarantino (*Kill Bill*), and Guillermo del Toro (*Hellboy*) manage both to sample from their inspirations and soulfully transform them. Sommers, whose previous efforts were *The Mummy* (1999) and *The Mummy Returns* (2001), is a dim bulb powered by a giant studio trust fund. He makes empty but vulgarly extravagant special-effects feasts: Donald Trump horror movies."—David Edelstein, *Slate*: "Curse of the Vampire," May 7, 2004.

"...this movie feels overstuffed because it was terribly executed by a filmmaker who has never seen a CGI model he didn't like. Unlike those amusingly wacky '40s flicks, *Van Helsing* is a lumbering hulk of a movie that is more ungraceful than Boris Karloff in a pound of make-up after an 18-hour shoot. Aspects that should be fun, such as a gothic would-be Harrison Ford battling a werewolf, are merely draining."—David Crow, *Den of Geek*, January 23, 2013.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Hugh Jackman (Gabriel Van Helsing); Kate Beckinsale (Anna Valerious); Richard Roxburgh (Count Dracula); David Wenham (Carl); Shuler Hensley (Frankenstein's Monster); Kevin J. O'Connor (Igor); Will Kemp (Velkan/Wolf Man); Elena Anaya (Aleera); Samuel West (Dr. Victor Frankenstein); Stephen Fisher (Dr. Jekyll).

CREW: Universal Pictures, Sommers Company and Stillkings presents a Stephen Sommers Film, *Van Helsing*. Casting: Joanna Colbert, Priscilla John, Ellen Lewis. Costume Designers: Gabriella Pescucci, Carlo Poggioli. Special Effects: Industrial Light and Magic, Weta Digital, Keith Vanderlaan's Captive Audience Productions. Music: Alan Silvestri. Director of Photography: Allen Daviau. Film Editors: Bob Ducsay, Lelly Matsumoto. Producers: Bob Ducsay, Stephen Sommers. Executive Producer: Sam Mercer. Written and Directed by: Stephen Sommers. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 131 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After defeating Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in Paris, monster hunter Van Helsing (Jackman) is recruited to go after Count Dracula (Roxburgh) in Transylvania before the vampire can kill Anna (Beckinsale), the last in an important bloodline. Dracula wants to marry Anna whose brother is a werewolf. Hoping to redeem himself for past actions, Van Helsing and inventor friend Carl (Wenham) face off against Dracula.

COMMENTARY: In the mid-2000s, horror aficionados had a name for films such as *Van Helsing*. They called them "CGI crapfests."

It's an uncharitable if memorable description, to be certain, and not terribly far off the mark either. The decade of the 2000s saw multiple attempts to successfully marry horror characters (mainly vampires and werewolves) with both action movie tropes and with the newest and coolest frontier in special visual effects: computer generated imagery. Franchises such as *Underworld*, *Resident Evil*, and to a lesser extent, *Blade*, found a niche with that kind of approach. *Van Helsing* follows a similar attempt to "action up" another monster, the Mummy, by the same director, Stephen Sommers. Sommers' 1999 version of that material was well-received by fans and audiences, and a huge success at the box office. Accordingly, one can't truly fault him for believing the same equation (using horror characters in an action setting) would work with all the old Universal Monsters.

Hence, the existence of *Van Helsing*: an action-horror, monster movie smack-down featuring Dracula, the Frankenstein monster, a wolf man (if not THE wolfman), and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Also present for the fun, such as it is, are Dracula's vampire brides.

Jokey and jaunty, *Van Helsing* is an incredibly shallow film that doesn't really serve any of its characters well. Forget the Universal Monsters, *Van Helsing* heavily apes the universe of another beloved screen character: James Bond, 007. Here, Van Helsing works for the Catholic Church as an agent fighting evil forces and is assisted by a friar who plays the role of Q and outfits him with such gadgets and trinkets as holy water garlic and an explosive called Glycerin 48. Beckinsale is on hand as the luscious Bond girl of the film.

Meanwhile, *Van Helsing* cribs from the *X-Men* films Wolverine's history of amnesia, and gives that to Jackman's character too, which is disconcerting to say the least. There are also touches of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in the film, which makes it hard to remember whom Jackman is supposed to be playing, other than a generic action hero. He's a James Bond/Indy/Wolverine-type protagonist and one lacking much distinction or interest. It's as if the filmmaker just decided to throw every movie reference from horror, sci-fi, and fantasy that he could think of at the screen and hope that Jackman could pull it all together into a coherent characterization. That Jackman does as well as he does here is a testament to his chops as an actor.

The monsters come across even more poorly than the film's hero. They are featured, largely, as cartoon characters. The film treats them as campy, the actors handle them as campy, and the poor CGI special effects reinforce the two-dimensional aspects of the monsters. It's all a sad result for Dracula, the Frankenstein Monster, and the others. They don't get much time to become developed characters and the screenplay has no interest in depicting them as such.

This author's argument about 2000s era CGI is simple. The imagery is fine, generally for science fiction: for the imagination of other worlds and beings from other worlds. But CGI in horror rarely works. Horror films are about the flesh, about the blood. With flying harpies defying gravity or werewolves leaping to impossible heights, our eyes automatically reject what we see as false. This is a problem in horror, which is supposed to be, largely, both grounded and real. We can't be afraid of a cartoon. We don't fear an animated being. What we fear is the way our bodies are twisted by vampirism, or lycanthropy. What we fear are monsters that exist in our world, and obey the same rules of gravity and physics, that we must ... while still being monsters. Films such as *Van Helsing* that leap from one CGI set piece to another willy-nilly exist in a world that is fantasy, not horror. The creations here are not impacted by gravity and have no weight. With no weight, they offer no fear.

This debate brings the discussion to creative intent. Was the intent simply to make a big fantasy featuring familiar horror characters? If so, that seems an unfortunate and unnecessary admission that the Universal Monsters can no longer pack a psychic, frightening punch. Again, these monsters were all conceived in horror pictures, not super heroic fantasies. Secondly, what is the creative point of making your villain, Roxburgh's anemic Dracula, less than frightening, even in an action picture? The villain role is always better if the character possesses menace. Also, isn't the idea, even in a fantasy world, that the characters are real? And, therefore that they must obey some rules, even if they happen to be alien or fantasy ones?

By point of contrast, a TV series called *Penny Dreadful* aired a decade or so after *Van Helsing*, and featured Dracula, the Frankenstein Monster, Dr. Jekyll, and Dorian Gray, among others. It succeeded as

a character study and took each character seriously.

By contrast, everything here, including the monsters, is just phantasmagoria, another special effect to throw at the screen. And again, no exaggerations, the special effects in this film today look nothing short of risible. The movie is an endless series of confrontations that, finally, doesn't amount to much.

At one point in the film, Dracula notes that he is hollow and that he will live forever. *Van Helsing* is half-like him: hollow. As for the other half, the movie is already better left forgotten. To throw Stephen Sommers a bone, a jaunty, cartoon approach like the one he adopted here might really work on an adaptation of something like *Flash Gordon*, *Buck Rogers*, or *Doc Savage*, even.

Let's hope he leaves horror alone and makes one of those movies instead.

The Village ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"...Shyamalan probably spends too much time explaining how this system works, instead of trusting the audience to go with it. But *The Village* is a Gothic romance, filled with shadows, fog, and long stretches of earnest yearning. And Gothic romances are not stories that need logical consistency to thrive. Instead, they need thematic coherence, and that's where *The Village* shines."—Emily VanDerWerff, *Vox*: "M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* is an underrated masterpiece," January 23, 2019.

"Shyamalan poses questions about the human response to evil and loss then allows the audience to come its own conclusions. His themes are incredibly relevant to the dilemmas we face today: Should we confront the things that threaten us and try to defeat them, or should we retreat, sacrificing even truth if it is necessary to enjoy a precious, if tenuous, peace? Should we ignore real menaces we can't control in favor of imagined ones we can? Shyamalan doesn't paint his villagers motivations as right or wrong, and his reticence to make an allegory of his tale may leave some viewers frustrated. But it will also leave them thinking more deeply about the issues than if they were force-fed a lesson. Already, critics are reviewing *The Village* through their own political lenses, and it is to Shyamalan's credit that both the left and right could make credible arguments that the film falls in their favor."—Megan Basham, *National Review*: "Morals in the Village," July 30, 2004.

"I guessed the twist from the poster and its tagline. Swear to god. Saw it up on a billboard a week before the screening, guessed to myself the twist, and was 100% correct. Save 20 bucks and 2 hours of your life. Read the billboard and then go see something else."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Bryce Dallas Howard (Ivy Walker); Joaquin Phoenix (Lucius Hunt); Adrien Brody (Noah Percy); William Hurt (Edward Walker); Sigourney Weaver (Alice Hunt); Brendan Gleeson (August Nicholson); Cherry Jones (Mrs. Clack); Celia Weston (Vivian Percy); John Christopher Jones (Robert Percy); Frank Collision (Victor); Jayne Atkinson (Tabitha Walker); Judy Greer (Kitty Walker); Fran Kranz (Christoph Cane); Michael Pitt (Finton Coin); Jesse Eisenberg (Jamison); Charlie Hofheimer (Young Security Guard); Zack Wall (Donald); Pascale Renate Smith (Marybeth).

CREW: Buena Vista Pictures, Touchstone Pictures, Blinding Edge Pictures and Scott Rudin Productions present *The Village*. Casting: Douglas Aibel. Production Designer: Tom Foden. Costume Designer: Ann Roth. Special Effects: Steve Johnson's Edge FX, Illusion Arts, Industrial Light and Magic. Music: James Newton Howard. Director of Photography: Roger Deakins. Film Editor: Christopher Tellefsen. Producers: Sam Mercer, Scott Rudin, M. Night Shyamalan. Written and Directed by: M. Night Shyamalan. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In a remote, rural village governed by a group of Elders (Hurt, Weaver, Gleeson, etc.), these leaders rebuff the efforts of young Lucius Hunt (Phoenix) to visit the towns beyond and bring back medicines and tools for the agrarian community. Soon after Lucius's entreaties, an old enemy—

monstrous creatures known as “Those We Don’t Speak Of”—breach the town border, killing livestock and marking the denizens’ houses with the evil color, red. Meanwhile, a developmentally arrested young man, Noah Percy (Brody), stabs Lucius, badly wounding him, when he learns of the blacksmith’s engagement to a friend, the blind Ivy Walker (Howard). Lucius will die soon without medicine from the towns, and Ivy loves him desperately. A town Elder and founder of the town, Walker (Hurt)—Ivy’s father—confides in her about the Village’s true nature, as well as the monsters. Now, Ivy must venture, alone and afraid, to the towns if she hopes to save the life of her intended husband.

COMMENTARY: *The Village* (2004) might be viewed as the essential turning point—or even point of no return—for the genre films of M. Night Shyamalan. Although the film was a huge box office hit, grossing over 256 million dollars worldwide against a 50-million-dollar budget, it also made significantly less than *Signs* (2002) did. That film had a global take of 408 million dollars. Similarly, the reviewers at this point had traveled from mostly positive notices (*The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable* and *Signs*) to strongly mixed ones in their responses. From here—with films such as *Lady in the Water* (2007), *The Happening* (2008) and *After Earth* (2013)—the trend turned fully, catastrophically negative. To put it another way, a critical darling soon turned critical punching bag, and *The Village* stands at ground zero for that tragic process. On that front, and according to some filmgoers, it’s all downhill from here for M. Night Shyamalan.

This author does not agree.

In terms of theme and sensitivity of approach, *The Village* has much in common with the previous films by this director. Specifically, it concerns a main character who finds her purpose in life, and simultaneously involves the nature of sight. By the same token, the film involves another Shyamalan obsession: *storytelling*. It seems to ask, in some canny way, if it is ever okay for a storyteller to lie. Is there a greater responsibility for a storyteller than to tell the truth? That point roils underneath the film’s structure and characters, and may change how you perceive certain characters, or even the film’s story.

The main protagonist in *The Village* is a character for the ages: Ivy Walker, played by Bryce Dallas Howard. Unlike Malcolm Crowe, David Dunn, Elijah Price, Graham Hess or Mr. Heep, Ivy is not at all blind to her purpose in life. She is actually—literally—blind in fact, but not so to what she desires, or how life should be. Specifically, Ivy is in love with mild-mannered blacksmith Lucius Hunt (Joaquin Phoenix) and understands that they are supposed to share their lives together. Dark forces rear their head during the narrative and attempt to destroy that destiny, and Ivy faces incredible peril to preserve what she knows is the right path: to stay on course despite the duplicity and “storytelling” of the Elders in her community, including her father.

But more than anything else, Ivy is a point of significant light. The film expresses visually Ivy Walker’s sense of indomitable courage. She can’t face the world with her eyes because of her handicap. Instead, she reaches out to interface with the world with a remarkable gesture: an up-turned palm. There’s an expectation in that motion; in that action. Ivy knows not what will touch her palm, but she holds her hand out to encounter it, nonetheless. It’s a beautiful view of optimism and hope; of meeting the world on its own terms without fear or even, really expectation.

The Village primarily is a character study, and to a high degree a love story. Ivy is a beautiful person through and through, optimistic in the face of defeat, and tenacious before any challenge. She is truly, *wondrously* alive. She is quite simply delightful. Ivy’s love of dance, her attaching of “color” to those in her life, and other affecting character traits make her an unforgettable and worthwhile protagonist. Similarly, the repartee between the loquacious Ivy and the taciturn Lucius is funny and touching. This duo shares a great scene in which they get directly at their noticeable personality differences in a lover’s quarrel. “*Why can you not say what is in your head?*” asks Ivy, flustered. “*Why can you not stop saying what is in your head?*” Lucius replies with exasperation. The film features many moments like this one; moments that seem to understand how no one can annoy or irritate us as much as the people we love. They’ve got our number. And we have theirs. So largely on the basis of Ivy’s story, and her journey to achieve her purpose, *The Village* is a strong film.

The biggest concern with *The Village* is the way that it “cheats.” In *The Seventh Sense*, *Unbreakable*, or *Signs* Shyamalan never overtly or blatantly cheated to maintain one of his trademark false realities. His films work in the following fashion: A main character goes through life “blinded” by his or her perceptual sets, only to have those blinders removed in the last act. He or she then sees life how it really is. Some see this reckoning as a “twist ending.” Engaged viewers, however, may choose to see the new angle of sight as the character’s recognition of his or her previous selective exposure. In other words, this character suddenly sees the world in a new and more truthful away. All barriers to accurate sight dissipate. The character drops his or her previous perceptual baggage. But early in *The Village*, there is a funeral for a child who has died, Danny Nicholson. The camera catches sight of his gravestone and it reads, on screen—in close-up no less: 1890–1897. These dates apparently reveal precisely when the action is occurring (shortly before the 20th century), and so the audience attunes itself to that context. We are shown these dates deliberately.

And of course, they are a lie.

The year is not 1897, but likely 2003 or 2004. The people of “the village” have shunned the modern age and its violence and technology and have set back the clock over a hundred years. The details of this story bear this out, but the gravestone remains a problem. It answers a question the audience wants answered regarding its orientation to place and time. *It knowingly fools us*. This date is not something nebulous that can be interpreted two ways, but something that is tangible and defined. And again, it’s a lie.

Now, one might note that it is possible that the families that established the isolated village chose a date and set the clock and calendar back a hundred years. But why would they do that in an isolated society? If there is no outer world worth visiting the Village, why begin it in 1870, say, instead of 1970? What benefit would that hundred-year difference give them? The people born and raised in the village would have no idea what “1970” means in terms of context. It’s just a number. So, it seems unnecessary to turn back the clock. In other words, the date on the gravestone smells of a bread crumb left to lead the audience in the wrong direction, and nothing else. There aren’t two possible readings of it, and indeed the gravestone is not mentioned at the end of the film, when the truth is learned about the villagers being people displaced from violent modernity.

However—and there’s always a “however” with the films of this artist—it is also true that *The Village* involves implicitly, at least on some level, lies. *Or more aptly, lies as they relate to stories and storytellers*. Walker and the other Elders maintain many lies every day. They maintain the lie of “Those Who Shall Not Be Spoken About.” They maintain the lie of the evil color, red. They maintain the lie of the calendar date. Walker must eventually explain such lies to Ivy, and she must then choose—with this knowledge—what to do. Does knowledge of the lie make her life better or worse? Or is the lie, ultimately inconsequential to her happiness? We can assume that Ivy decides that she still wants the future she had with Lucius before she knew the truth. One cannot blame her for this. All humans desire what is familiar and safe. Offscreen, she decides that the lie is worth maintaining, because she can still find happiness within its confines. One must now apply this idea to the film’s storyteller, Shyamalan. The presence of the gravestone date pretty much qualifies as a lie. In this case, Shyamalan is showing us an untruth so he can tell this particular story; weave this particular narrative. How can we judge if that is right? Well what is the narrative? Is our enjoyment of it worth a lie?

Some might view *The Village* as a narrative about optimism and courage and hope in the young. The world may not be what they want it to be, but they can make it better. The Elders made a choice, and to quote the film “*we may question our decisions*”—but their intentions were honorable. They wanted to make a world free of violence and crime; a world that was secure and safe, and free from modernity. They banished the color red (symbolic of blood) and sought to start over. The film asks audiences to explicitly consider the idea that it may be okay to lie, if the cause is just. But is it really right to lie for a good cause (like an entertaining cinematic experience?)

Perhaps Shyamalan felt he had to feature that visual lie—the gravestone—because his story of hope and courage, and of generations too, was worth telling. And perhaps, structurally speaking, he felt he needed that date on screen. Perhaps because he didn’t want audiences wondering constantly, “when is

this taking place?," instead of focusing on the characters and their journey. One can see how the idea of "liars" is woven into the actions of the characters (namely the Elders) and reflected, actually, in the structure of the plot.

The other significant criticism of the film's structure involves timing. *The Village* is structured in such a way that Ivy (and therefore the audience) learns the secret of the monsters before she is menaced by one (really Noah Percy dressed in the suit). The movie would be a lot scarier if somehow it were possible to alter the order of things in the third act. So that when Ivy is ensconced in that field of red and menaced by the beast, the audience is still wondering what the hell that thing is. As it stands in the film, the audience know its Noah, and feels less fear and uncertainty than it should. Viewers should be gripped with terror, wondering what the hell that thing is. Similarly, this is the first film the director's made in which Shyamalan doesn't demonstrate full faith and trust in the audience. The audience is probably told one or two too many times by the Elders about people in their families who died. The first time, viewers go right by it. The second time, watchers understand that it is important information because it has been heard twice. The third time, it plays as obvious that audiences should be paying attention and anticipating the pay-off. We get it! This is Very Important Information. Were this writer to re-edit *The Village*, he would take out the gravestone shot, remove one reference to a relative being killed in "the Towns" and try to figure out some way to change the timing of when we know the monster is simply Noah. That last one is the tallest order. But the film would be completely rebuilt, and devoid of cognitive noise if those edits were made.

Here's the deal though: precious if little of that criticism takes away from the overall effect of the film, or the beautiful writing and performances. Beyond featuring a wonderful central character, Ivy, *The Village* speaks to the context of the time, 2004. Take out the specific details and the audience sees a country (the village) which arranges a false flag operation so as to scare its people into compliance and maintain the secrets of its government. In 2003, of course, the U.S. government exaggerated the country into the Iraq War. Saddam would use nukes on us, and if we didn't wage war, the result would be nuclear mushrooms over our cities. How many times did Dick Cheney spout that nonsense? Well, Saddam neither had nukes, nor the delivery system to launch them into the United States. Yet somehow, he became an existential threat that required a very expensive invasion. Never mind that he was a secular bulwark between theocratic nations, preserving the fragile stability of the Middle East. The point again involves lies (or exaggerations). They can be used to get people to do things that a government desires.

If one drills down the details of *The Village* even further, a certain color, red, denotes fear and danger to the easily cowed villagers. And in 2004, Americans were getting used to the new color-coded graph of terrorism, freshly minted by the Department of Homeland Security. And red was the color of greatest jeopardy.

Do colors denote meaning? No, of course not. (Consider that in 1927 *Time Magazine* was advocating that boys wear pink and girls wear blue), but colors are often assigned meaning by social engineers in an effort to reinforce cultural norms or achieve a social end (like validating the choice to go to war). In the Homeland Security color scheme, yellow means safe, and red means imminent danger. In *The Village*, the villagers wear yellow cloaks when near the border, promoting their safety and health, and instances of red—danger—are shunned and feared. The people are programmed to react to visual stimuli, without knowing the reasons behind those visual stimuli. This color-coded terror advisory was eliminated in the 2010s, at least, because many feared it would be used for political manipulation. The AFP reported on August 20, 2009, in the article "Politics colored US 'terror alert'" by Oliver Knox, that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Attorney General John Ashcroft had pressured Homeland Security Chief Tom Ridge to elevate the color-coded threat level to impact the Presidential Election. Lies were connected with colors, to achieve a political cause or agenda.

Overall, *The Village* appears to suggest that people can be controlled by lies, but simultaneously—in a weird way—that one needn't throw away the baby with the bathwater. Walker and the Elders have lied and manipulated the people, and Ivy is sad for them because they have transgressed morally. Walker begs her to forgive his "silly lies." And to all available evidence, she does. Life is not so bad that it is worth destroying this village to save it. Again, if one were so inclined, this scene might be read as an

explanation for the Bush Administration's malfeasance. The people there thought that lies were necessary for the country to take the "right" action (fight Terror and go to War in Iraq).

Very few film directors could write such lines as "*The world moves for love. It kneels before it. In awe,*" and get away with it. But William Hurt delivers Shyamalan's dialogue well, and the focus there is right where it should be: on two people separated by fate, joined at heart. The movie may have some structural problems, but its heart is in the right place. Sometimes, people do silly things, or try to make life perfect, forgetting that "*heartache is a part of life.*" They stumble in their pursuits. They lie to get what they want.

But *The Village* suggests that their mistakes were made out of love, and that the progeny of those foolhardy people might make a silly dream into a better version of reality. That's the social contract, isn't it? The first generation makes a decision and tries to get things right, failing egregiously along the way. But the next generation starts, inch by inch, to perfect those advances. Watching *The Village*, and contemplating the lying, pathetic Elders, one thought shines through: the future belongs to Ivy Walker, a blind woman who can see better and more clearly than her sighted father. She will address the wrongs of her father, surely.

In terms of *The Village*, the best approach to appreciating it is to forgive the filmmaker the "silly lies" he utilizes to bring us this story and make it all hang together.

TIMELINE: 2005

January 20: George W. Bush is inaugurated as President of the United States for a second term.

January 26: Thirty-one Americans die in a helicopter crash in Iraq.

March 20: The U.S. Senate with a Republican majority passes "Terri's Law," involving Terri Schiavo, a private citizen in an irreversible vegetative state. Her husband is denied the ability to end her life and remove her feeding tube. Despite his preference for individual and state rights over Federal control, President Bush signs the law giving the government control of a citizen's life.

April 12: Pope John Paul II passes away. Soon after, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger becomes the new Pope, Benedict XVI.

April 23: The first video is uploaded to YouTube.

May 31: On Larry King Live, on CNN, Vice President Cheney declares that the insurgency in Iraq is "*in its last throes.*"

June 13: Michael Jackson, the King of Pop, is found not guilty on all charges related to charges of child molestation.

July 7: Suicide bombers attack London. Fifty-two people are killed, and seven-hundred wounded.

August 29: Hurricane Katrina makes landfall along the Gulf Coast, doing 108 billion dollars in damage. More than 1,000 Americans are killed in the storm. New Orleans is devastated.

September 2: At the Concert for Hurricane Relief, aired on NBC, MSN, and CNBC, Kanye

West declares “George W. Bush doesn’t care about black people.”

September 14: In Baghdad, the insurgency kills 160 people with bombs, and more than 500 people are injured.

October 19: The trial of Saddam Hussein begins.

November 27: Angela Merkel assume the office of Chancellor in Germany, becoming the first woman to be elected to that position.

Alone in the Dark *

Critical Reception

“Think of the lamest horror movie you’ve ever seen. Now think of Tara Reid in the lamest horror movie you’ve ever seen.”—Janice Page, *Boston Globe*: “Awful *Dark* Should be Relegated to Obscurity,” January 28, 2005, page C10.

“A weird, ethereal apocalyptic, cartoonish mishmash ... is amateurish at best and asinine at worst.”—Mack Bates, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*: “Dark best left alone....,” January 28, 2005, page 8.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Christian Slater (Edward Carnby); Tara Reid (Aline Cedrac); Stephen Dorff (Richard Burke); Frank C. Turner (Sam Fischer); Mathew Walker (Professor Hudgens); Will Sanderson (Agent Miles); Mark Atcheson (Captain Chernick); Darren Shahlavi (John Dillon); Karin Konoval (Sister Clara); Dustyn Arthurs (Young Edward); Ed Anders (James Pinkerton); Brad Turner (Beat Cop); Malcolm Scott (Delivery Guy).

CREW: Lionsgate Films, AITD Productions, Boll KG Productions, in association with Herold Productions and Brightlight Pictures presents *Alone in the Dark*. Casting: Maureen Webb. Costume Designer: Maria Livingstone. Production Designer: Tink. Music: Reinhard Besser, Oliver Lieb, Bernd Wendtlandt, Peter Zweier. Director of Photography: Mathias Neumann. Film Editor: Richard Schwadel. Producer: Shawn Williamson. Executive Producers: Uwe Boll, Wolfgang Herold. Written by: Elan Mastai, Michael Roesch, Peter Scheerer. Directed by: Uwe Boll. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After a childhood in which he underwent mysterious government experiments, Edward Carnby (Slater) is now a psychic investigator. His current obsession is a long-dead civilization and its artifacts. One of those artifacts is a gateway to a realm of ancient, demon-like creatures. Carnby teams with a scientist at a museum, Aline (Reid), and tough-as-nails military commander Burke (Dorff) to save the human race.

COMMENTARY: Uwe Boll’s *Alone in the Dark* is a tough slog. It’s an overlong and under-developed movie about a psychic investigator and Lovecraft-type portal to another world where monsters dwell. It is based on a popular video game series of the decade, created by Infogrames, but there is nothing fun or immersive about the movie.

The film’s notion of a gateway to another dimensions, however, is far more believable than another of the film’s flights of fancy. The intrepid viewer is asked to reckon with the improbably notion of Tara Reid as a brilliant scientist, and that one simply doesn’t pass the smell test.

The film is also undone by some cheap-looking CGI creatures that don’t bear close inspection. And Boll’s machine-gun sense of style is as crass as ever, too, with shots of (CGI) bullets firing in close-up from of a gun barrel and directly at the audience. The film utilizes the visual vocabulary of *The Matrix* series, but at least in that franchise there is a consistent set of rules applied. Here, everything is haphazard.

Crushingly dull for most of its run, *Alone in the Dark* is punctuated by moments of absurd action and dialogue like, “I’ve never seen symbiosis like this before!” Brothers from different mothers Christian Slater and Stephen Dorff play nemeses in the monster-hunting game, and neither performer fares well as the movie slides into its baffling end-of-the-world conclusion.

And yet despite its myriad flaws, *Alone in the Dark* is clearly onto something worthwhile here. Fierce monsters from a parallel universe bleeding into our reality and individuals investigating psychic powers are elements right out of the popular TV series *Stranger Things* (2017–). Sure, that beloved Netflix series colors all those elements through a love of 1980s nostalgia and homages to John Carpenter and Stephen King, a coherent lens that *Alone in the Dark* notably lacks, but *Alone in the Dark*’s tale is very similar, in terms of ingredients, to an effort that cult-TV fans were grooving on a decade-and-a-half after its release. Here the alien world isn’t exactly the Upside Down, and the monsters aren’t called demi-gorgons, but the concepts are strikingly similar. Boll simply doesn’t know what to do with them to make them compelling.

Recognizing the similarities between *Alone in the Dark* and *Stranger Things* doesn’t take long, and this interminable horror film is almost two hours of action scenes that don’t thrill, dialogue that doesn’t scintillate, and ideas that don’t come together. Watching it you may feel that you are alone in the ... well, you know.

The Amityville Horror ★ ★

Critical Reception

“...the worst in a recent batch of horror updates...”—David Germaine, *Examiner*: “Amityville Horror-ible,” April 15, 200, page C2.

“This sloppy remake ... offers up more yawns than screams.”—Eric Andersson, *Us Weekly*, October 17, 2005, page 74.

“...a procession of unregenerate B-level goosing.”—Gene Seymour, *Newsday*: “In *Amityville*, real estate still bleeds,” April 15, 2005 page B06.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Ryan Reynolds (George Lutz); Melissa George (Kathy Lutz); Jesse James (Billy Lutz); Jimmy Bennett (Michael Lutz); Chloe Grace Morretz (Chelsea Lutz); Rachel Nichols (Lisa); Philip Baker Hall (Father Callaway); Isabel Conner (Jodie Defeo); Brendan Donaldson (Ronald Defeo); Annabel Armour (Realtor); Rich Komenich (Police Chief).

CREW: MGM, Dimension Films, Platinum Dunes, in association with Radar pictures presents *The Amityville Horror*. Casting: Lisa Field. Costume Designer: David Robinson. Production Designer: Jennifer Williams. Music: Steve Jablonsky. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Asylum VFX, Industrial Light & Magic. Director of Photography: Peter Lyons Collister. Film Editors: Roger Barton, Christian Wagner. Producers: Michael Bay, Andrew Form, Brad Fuller. Executive Producers: David Crockett, Ted Field. Based on the novel by: Jay Anson. Based on the screenplay by: Sandor Stern. Based on material by: George Lutz and Kathleen Lutz. Written by: Scott Kosar. Directed by: Andrew Douglas. M.P.A.A. Rating: RR. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A year after the De Feo murders occur there, the struggling Lutz family moves into a home in Amityville, Long Island, only to be terrorized by supernatural happenings. The patriarch, George Lutz (Reynolds), begins to go insane, turning homicidal, and his wife, Kathy (George), takes steps to protect her children.

COMMENTARY: The Remake Syndrome is once more at work in this well-mounted but ultimately

empty remake of the 1970s horror classic from the Michael Bay mill. To refresh your memory, the Remake Syndrome is the crisis that every horror movie remake must face, and it goes something like this: Why remake a story if you don't update it meaningfully to its new context? And if you don't *have* anything to say in a remake of a classic, then why go to all the time and expense producing it?

The Remake Syndrome explains why some remakes—Rob Zombie's *Halloween*, Alexandre Aja's *The Hills Have Eyes*, and Zack Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead*, to name a few—succeed creatively why others fail. Love or hate the direction of those remakes, these films are updated in meaningful way that speaks to the context of the 2000s.

The Amityville Horror does no such thing.

In fact, it is an empty-headed horror film with no new observations or insights about the Lutzes and their month-long battle with the supernatural on Long Island. The 1979 feature, as Stephen King famously wrote in his 1981 book *Danse Macabre*, was really about the “horror” of home ownership and the struggle to remain in the American middle class in the 1970s. The Lutz family kept losing money on their too-good-to-be-true new house, and that was the sub-text informing the horror. The most telling scene of panic and paranoia in the original film involved not demons, but the inexplicable disappearance of a wad of cash needed to pay for a demanding wedding caterer. The 1979 film cleverly utilized demons and ghosts as a stand-in for the real-life fear; that home ownership is a never-ending money pit.

All that material is absent in this remake, which is too bad, because the squeeze on the middle class and home ownership were critical issues of the 2000s. For example, President George W. Bush coined the term “*ownership society*” on February 20, 2003. The slogan embodied his beliefs in economic freedom, individual accountability and the importance of owning property. These three things were key to his belief in a prosperous future America. Yet, in the 2000s, wages were stagnant, economic recessions occurred twice on his watch, in 2001 through 2008, and the dream of home ownership was a key ingredient of the economic collapse in his second term, since banks were offering mortgages to buyers who couldn't really afford them. Given the facts and pitfalls of Bush's “ownership society,” the new *Amityville Horror* might have double-downed meaningfully on the subtext of the 1979 film, which took place in another era of economic malaise.

Alas, this film is a straight-up tale of a family fighting demons in a haunted house, with no larger or deeper meaning about anything real or vital in the 21st century between the lines. It's *The Amityville Horror* for Dummies. In fact, the film is primarily a vehicle for Ryan Reynolds to remove his shirt and show off his impressive physique.

Admittedly, he looks great.

The whole film looks great, actually. But the movie isn't about anything other than what it appears to be, the umpteenth possession/haunted house movie in history (and the ninth film in the *Amityville* franchise).

Here's the second problem of the remake syndrome. By arguing that *The Amityville Horror* fails to provide any subtext to its tale, this author is implicitly stating that a remake can only succeed by being the same as the source material, when I just noted above that new filmmakers need to put their stamp on old franchises. But here's the distinction. I don't need *The Amityville Horror* remake to be about home ownership, a family attempting to remain in the middle class, or the American dream. I just need it to be about *something* that makes the terror timely and identifiable for 21st-century audiences.

This *Amityville Horror* doesn't really connect to anything in the Zeitgeist of the decade. It doesn't relate to the post-9/11 milieu, or any relevant aspect of life in the decade it was made. The film is set in the 1970s like the original, but it doesn't have anything trenchant to comment on about the disco decade, either.

It operates on one, superficial track of literal meaning, and that's it.

The problem is the comparison. One watches a film like the 1979 original, which is scary on a literal level, first. But then, it is also teeming with sub-text that makes it relevant to life in America. Next, one watches a flat remake that isn't even particularly scary on a literal/narrative level, and registers that it makes no attempt whatsoever to comment on the era it was made, except, perhaps, for the

expectations regarding male celebrity physiques in the 2000s.

By comparison, the remake just looks empty, and as if it is missing a key element that would have made it click for audiences.

All the tricks that the remake of *The Amityville Horror* throws at the audience are ones that we are well-familiar with and have lost the capacity to be scared by. The original featured some spiky, odd moments. There was a scene where a stranger shows up at the kitchen door and started to harass Kathleen, but then vanished. That scene didn't apparently connect to the larger horror in a tangible way, and yet contributed to the unsettling mood overall. The remake of *The Amityville Horror* omits that scene, and charts a thoroughly formulaic, predictable course that leaves no room for innovation, ingenuity, or finally, terror.

But Ryan Reynolds looks really hot.

Boogeyman * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"It's really a shame the characters and story were so underwritten, because director Stephen Kay and the set designers establish a great mood for this film from the get-go. It's a very dark and mundane palette, and the film does achieve a creepy atmosphere throughout. Director Kay also makes excellent use of some crane and dolly shots to give the film a pristine look. Technically the film is well-made, fundamentally it is not."—Bill Clark, *From the Balcony*, February 6, 2005.

"This slapdash rip-off of *Nightmare on Elm Street* doesn't deserve a same-breath mention as the Wes Craven flick. *Boogeyman* is devoid of shocks and style. It's more creaky than creepy."—Amy Longsdorf, *Morning Call*, June 2, 2005, E12.

"Just wait. Director Stephen Kay, has a whole toolbox of scare effects, many of them borrowed from producer Sam Raimi. These include sudden frights, a camera that has the paradoxical ability to creep along in fast-motion, stopping to sniff out the occasional closet—go ahead, turn that doorknob—and the kind of insane editing that makes it look like scenes from several slasher flicks and Japanese psychological suspense movies have been placed into a food processor and chopped into a horror frappe."—Jay Stone, *The Ottawa Citizen*, February 4, 2005, page D3.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Barry Watson (Tim); Emily Deschanel (Kate); Skye McCole Barusiak (Franny); Tory Mussett (Jessica); Andrew Glover (Boogeyman); Lucy Lawless (Tim's Mother); Charles Mesure (Tim's Father); Philip Gordon (Uncle Mike); Aaron Murphy (Young Tim); Jennifer Rucker (Pam); Robyn Malcolm (Dr. Matheson).

CREW: Screen Gems and Ghosthouse Pictures in association with Senator Films presents *Boogeyman*. Casting: Marie Adams, Miranda Gooch, Lynn Kressel. Production Designer: Robert Gillies. Costume Designer: Jane Holland. Music: Joseph LoDuca. Special Effects: Oktobor Films, Weta Digital. Director of Photography: Bobby Bukowski. Film Editing: John Axelrad. Producers: Sam Raimi, Robert Tapert. Executive Producers: Gary Bryman, Joe Drake, Steve Hein, Carsten Lorenz. Story by: Eric Kripke. Written by: Eric Kripke, Juliet Snowden, Stiles White. Directed by: Stephen Kay. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young boy, Timmy, sees the Boogeyman kill his father in his bedroom one night. Fifteen years later, Timmy (Watson) is still deeply disturbed, and spends Thanksgiving weekend at the house of his girlfriend, Jessica (Mussett). However, he learns of his mother's death and returns to his childhood home, where he still fears the Boogeyman dwells. In his family home, Timmy must now confront his darkest fear.

COMMENTARY: This PG-13 horror movie produced by Sam Raimi and starring WB headliner Barry

Watson seems all-too-familiar if one has already seen *Darkness Falls* (2003), another horror film about a middle-class boy who grows up to be a traumatized survivor of a supernatural incursion into his bedroom. Both films involve a young male protagonist, a spectral entity (either the Boogeyman or the Tooth Fairy), and a return home to confront the childhood terror. Neither film, alas, is particularly successful or of a particularly high quality. One must wonder, however, why this particular concept or scenario became such a commonly used one in the decade of the 2000s. Perhaps it is because societally, Americans became much more aware in this decade of violence in the home, and the traumas undergone by American children. Those traumas include sexual abuse, and other terrors related to the place which should be a sanctuary: the childhood bedroom. Stories of such abuse were in the headlines, on TV, and in used in films.

Accordingly, *Boogeyman* is at its most compelling when it leaves the titular and poorly rendered CGI monster behind to focus more closely on the outward signs that trigger Tim's psychological trauma. After the prologue in which the Boogeyman drags away his father into a closet, Tim grows up to fear, well, everything. He is scared of the dark, and closets, for example. The closet, in particular, is a terrifying place to him. If a closet door is opened just a crack, he is a wreck, and the camerawork goes frenetic when Tim becomes trapped inside a closet at one point.

Cleverly, *Boogeyman* also features several shorts of disorder to taunt Tim and unsettle the audience. There is a tile cracked on the ceiling in his house, suggesting normalcy corrupted, and at one juncture, when Tim is sleeping in his bed, the audience also sees his full-body shadow. That shadow represents his fear of the darkness, and, of course, the fear of the boogeyman. The film also tellingly features several shots of doors slightly ajar, birds striking windshields unexpectedly, and other signs that the world itself is wrong. When Tim gazes at a picture of his family in happier days, the lights in the house flicker, a further symbol of disorder in his psyche, in his house, and in the larger world.

Boogeyman is cerebral enough to include all this imagery that suggests something is wrong in Tim's world. What has gone wrong? According to author Julia M. Wright in her essay "*Latchkey Hero: Masculinity, Class and the Gothic in Eric Kripke's Supernatural*" (Issue #47, 2008), writer Kripke in both his long-running series and here in *Boogeyman* utilizes monsters and the supernatural to "*gothically tie downward class mobility to the heightened vulnerability of children.*" She further writes:

...the failure of the father to protect his son from a violent world is represented as disabling the son's access to the American dream and confining him to a class position lower than that he enjoyed before the central crisis. This new class position is defined in multiple ways consistent across both the film and the series: the lack of a stable home, a single-parent family, retro cars and work clothes.... Both the movie and the series, moreover, deal with a traumatized boy's failed attempts at class passing.¹⁴

Here, Tim attempts to stay in the upper-middle class by courting Jessica, and attending her family's Thanksgiving celebration, which is depicted as elitist, even snooty. She has to explain to her family Tim's childhood trauma's, the fact that his father's absence in the family home caused his mother to spiral out of control, and Tim had to live with a poor uncle, in the back room of his bar. Accordingly, *Boogeyman* may concern the way that sexual abuse, and familial crisis adversely impacts children, and their viable future in prosperous America. From the vantage point of the 2020, when this book was written, this idea seems even more powerful, as many white, male children of the middle class have fallen backwards in terms of wealth and class in the previous decade, becoming Trump voters out of anger of having lost a previously high position in American society

Wright's reading of *Boogeyman*, coupled with the film's visual flourishes and tight editing, makes the film a more compelling viewing experience. However, the film also gets bogged down in the inconsistent mechanics of its title monster. Sometimes, closets are effectively portals to other locations, and sometimes humans, like Tim, can use them as such. This is the case when he basically teleports from Jessica's motel room back to his house.

And why, one must wonder, are ghost children spirits sometimes seen and sometimes not?

Harking back to the rubber reality movies of 1980s and the 1990s, it is always necessary in films of this type—featuring fearsome supernatural beings of intense abilities and strengths—to diagram

carefully the rules governing the monsters here, and there are no clear rules about how the Boogeyman operates.

The most clear-headed way to view *Boogeyman* is as a film of its time. It features a former star of the WB, includes ghost/supernatural children (much like the Japanese remake of your choice), renders its monster with poor CGI, and is rated PG-13, so as to attract the widest-possible audience. These factors all work against *Boogeyman*, and in some way, undercut what may be its greatest virtue: its suggestion that disruptions in the American family are destroying the middle class, and blocking access to the middle class for Generation Y, and Millennials. *The Boogeyman* of the film's title is not a creature which haunts nightmares, but which corrupts the American dream.

LEGACY: *Boogeyman* grossed more than sixty-five million dollars, and was a success at the box-office, and spawned two direct-to-video sequels: *Boogeyman 2* (2007) and *Boogeyman 3* (2009). Intriguingly, the sequels featured an entirely different version of the *Boogeyman*, transforming the monster into a rubber-reality slasher.

The Cave * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"...filmed by first-time director Bruce Hunt as a cacophony of bubbling water, waving arms, dripping teeth, bloody spray, whooshing camera movements, and Cole Hauser. The editing in *The Cave* makes a Michael Bay action movie look like an Iranian art film, and you never do know exactly what is going on except that it must be bad because people keep yelling each other's names."—Jay Stone, *CanWest News*, August 26, 2005.

"Director Bruce Hunt, best known for his visual effects on *Dark City* and his second-unit duties on that film and *The Matrix*, fails to bring much magic to *The Cave*'s underground world. The indifferently shot, oversized sets do not evoke any of *The Descent*'s suffocating claustrophobia. Compared to the cheerfully unlikely fantasy underworlds in *Journey to the Center of the Earth* or *At the Earth's Core*, or even the religious pomposity of James Cameron's undersea *The Abyss*, *The Cave*'s false depths are not worth plumbing."—Andrew Osmond, *Sight and Sound*, October 2005, page 48.

"*The Cave* is too timid to be scary, and Michael Steinberg and Tegan West's script isn't smart or sly enough to be funny. The actors have nothing to work with to make their characters seem real, although they manage to toss off a ton of technical terms without tripping over their tongues. First-time director Bruce Hunt tries to get away with jolty camerawork and frenetic editing as signs of adrenaline in action, but *The Cave*—aside from its eye candy—is empty."—Betsy Pickle, *Ocala Star*, August 26, 2005.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Cole Hauser (Jack McAllister); Eddie Cibrian (Tyler McAllister); Morris Chestnut (Top Buchanan); Lena Headey (Dr. Kathryn Jennings); Piper Perabo (Charlie); Rick Ravanello (Briggs); Daniel Dae Kim (Alex Kim); Kieran Darcy-Smith (Strode); Marce Iures (Dr. Nicolai); Vlad Radescu (Dr. Bacovia).

CREW: Screen Gems and Lakeshore Entertainment, in association with Cinerenta, City Productions and Cineblue present *The Cave*. Casting: Deborah Aquila, Tricia Wood. Production Designer: Pier Luigi Basile. Costume Designer: Wendy Partridge. Special Effects: Patrick Tatopoulos Designs, ProBono Post, Luma Pictures. Director of Photography: Ross Emery. Film Editing: Brian Berdan. Producers: Gary Lucchesi, Andrew Mason, Michael Ohaven, Tom Rosenberg, Richard S. Wright. Executive Producers: Neil Bluhm, Judd Malkin, Marco Mehltz. M.P.A.A. Rating: 97 minutes. PG-13.

SYNOPSIS: In the Carpathian Mountains, a research team and group of divers explore a new cave beneath a ruined abbey. The church there was built to seal the cave from winged demons, according to stories. Once underground, in unexplored terrain, the divers are attacked by something monstrous and find the return passage blocked by a rockslide. Now, led by the McAllister brothers (Hauser, Cibrian),

the team must discover a way out, even as a scientist, Dr. Jennings (Headey) contends with the discovery of a microscopic parasite in the subterranean world, one that could help account for the existence of the winged dragon.

COMMENTARY: “*Respect the cave*,” an expert advises in *The Cave* (2005), and audiences will want to attempt that, even with reservations. A sort of wet-*Descent* (2006) with many story points ported over from the much-superior *Pitch Black* (2000), the film is occasionally spectacular in presentation, but is mostly derivative in nature. The idea of exploring a new world, underneath our world is tantalizing, and fertile ground for a horror movie, as is the notion here of a creature that evolved in total isolation. Yet the film’s characters feel derivative and off the shelf, as do many of the plot twists.

Cole Hauser headlines the film, as Jack McAllister, and horror fans will recall his role in *Pitch Black* as the drug-addicted mercenary, Johns. In *The Cave*, he essays the Riddick role, essentially. As he begins to mutate into something monstrous, he must save the trapped explorers and scientists from a creature who can detect prey by sonar, or rather, “*echo-location*.” And significantly, Jack’s sight becomes different than those with whom he shares the cave, as he transforms. He uses this sight, like Riddick did against the flying alien dragons, to save his companions.

In some way, this is again the 2000s idea, seen in *Pitch Black*, of it taking evil to fight evil. When the scientists of *The Cave* learn the dragon that they face is actually a former human being—they see and recognize a tattoo—the idea becomes pronounced that human beings can become monsters. The movie makes that notion literal, but it was certainly metaphorical at the start of the 21st century, as moral clarity was harder and harder to come by. In the film, Jack fights back his transformation into a monster for the good of the people, and this fight may be viewed as an allusion to the War on Terror. Age. America was battling nefarious, murderous terrorists and insurgents, yet was also transforming, in the eyes of some, into a monster itself, by authorizing torture, denying prisoners of war due process, and even mistreating those prisoners in custody. What concerned so many Americans who watched: was it possible to accomplish a just mission in an unjust way? Could America save the world for “good” by doing bad? These were questions that roiled the world in the 2000s and perhaps, at least subtly, influenced the shape of movies such as *Freddy vs. Jason*, *AVP*, or even *The Cave*.

The Cave may just be at it best not during the monster scenes, but rather near the start of the film as the director sets up the film’s isolated environment, a so-called “*virgin cave*.” The first several minutes of *The Cave* linger on exposition that add to the sense of horror and entrapment the characters (and the audience) are supposed to feel.

Do you know how many cave divers per year end up dead? *One in fourteen*.

Do you know how long you can stay submerged with the film’s high-tech re-breathers? *Twenty-four hours*.

If this sort of material is your cup of tea, you may just love *The Cave* for how it attempts to set up its scares. If not, a fun game to play while waiting for the next murder is to think about what movie *The Cave* is currently cribbing from. There are a series of monster P.O.V. shots, for instance, that are reminiscent of *Predator* (1987).

The Cave features some nice aerial photography over the mountains, and there are some well-photographed sequences in the “*closed*” eco-system where the “*primeval*” life form thrives, but at times, the film is like a walking tour of the old *Pirates of the Caribbean* attraction at Disneyland. Now you’re on the rapids, now you’re underwater, now you’re on a mountainside, now you’re on an ice shelf, and now you’re so deep in the cave, you’re in a red-infused Hell. There are so many diverse environments on display in *The Cave*, all in apparent swimming/walking distance, that it’s more a geologic travelogue than a horror movie.

And I had to ask myself: *how do these people keep finding their way back to each other after they separate?* It just never seems particularly plausible. The cave divers perhaps (except that 1 in 14, noted above) could likely accomplish it, but the scientists and documentary filmmakers? How do *they* find their way around down there, stumbling in the dark, with swooping parasitic dragons homing in on

them by sonar and picking them off?

Finally, the film's sting in the tail/tale, that the cave mutation has found its way into the above-ground world, seems seriously wrong-headed, because it negates the sacrifices made by the characters throughout the adventure below to keep the mutating evil contained. A contrary reading, again playing into the War on Terror Age message however is this: the evil can't be contained. When threatened, good people will mutate into monsters, and that monstrosity will spread.

It knows no borders.

So perhaps this is a film where viewer mileage may actually vary a bit. Which monster will you root for?

*The Cavern (DTV) **

Critical Reception

CAST: Sybil Temtchine (Bailey); Mustafa Shakir (Gannon); Ogy Durham (Miranda); Andrew Caple-Shaw (Ori); Danny A. Jacobs (Ambrose); Drew Saenz-Hudson (Domingo); Johnnie Colter (Petr); Neno Pervan (Slava); Kamen Gabriel (Vlad); Cassandra Duarden (Rachel); True Tamplin (Young Petr).

CREW: Sony Home Pictures and Dead Crow Productions present *The Cavern*. Casting: Cheryl Miller. Costume Designer: Sarah Fleming. Production Designer: Billy Sale. Music: Bryan Galvez. Special Effects: Brites Blue Spot, Secret Machine VFX. Director of Photography: Yasu Tanida. Film Editing: Olatunde Osusanmi. Producers: Iona Miller, Terry Robins, Gerald A. Vitae Jr. Written and Directed by: Olatunde Osusanmi. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of cave explorers, along with an author writing a book, decide to explore a new cave system in Kazakhstan, in the Kyzyl Kum desert. The occasion is particularly solemn, however, because two years earlier, a member of the party died in a cave exploration. Now, the group descends into an opening it calls "Hell's Pit" and is confronted with a terror in the subterranean dark, a monstrous individual that hunts and eats them. In the end, the monster is discovered to be the survivor of a plane crash, one who has devolved into total, inhuman barbarity.

COMMENTARY: The 2000s brought a number of "subterranean" exercises in claustrophobia—or cave movies—to American screens. *The Cave* (2005), *The Descent* (2006), *The Descent 2* (2009), and this film, *The Cavern* (2005) are all examples of the trend. Why an obsession with caves during the decade? One can speculate, but caves, in some way, represent a return to the womb, or Mother Earth. They also represent a fear of the dark, and of being buried alive. No matter the decade in which they are highlighted, these ideas appear to be universal human dreads. *The Cavern*, alas, is a difficult film to enjoy because of its lighting and cinematographic choices, and because of the bizarre, unfinished way it culminates.

This outcome is unfortunate, since the film opens with a highly intriguing discussion of the cave as a realm important to the human imagination. One character, the book author interviews a brujo, who discusses the majesty and mystery of Earth's caves. He calls a cave "a sacred place" for nearly every religion in existence. He talks about caves as an antidote to modernity, a place that can't be controlled. He calls it, specifically, a "beast you can't control," and a world of "never ending night." At one point, one of the explorers notes as well that we have charted mountaintops and even oceans, but that caves represent the last great mystery on Earth. These are fascinating observations and should set up a terrifying tale of what happens when a sacred, uncontrollable world of darkness is breached by those who don't respect it enough.

Instead, however *The Cavern* goes into the dark, primordial cave under the desert, and then very quickly degenerates into a series of unilluminating close-up shots. The problem is that each character on the descent wears a helmet light, and the brightness of the light tends to wash out the details of the frame. This means we can make out (barely) the details of faces, but very little of those important caves themselves. Near the film's denouement, the lighting improves somewhat in a chamber with water and stalagmites, and then in the den of Petr, the villainous man-turned-beast, but by then it is too late, since watching the film has become a chore.

Even the film's opening scenes, set above ground, are difficult to watch, as a headache inducing red filter has apparently been applied to all the footage. This affectation makes the location footage seem small and tight, when, at this point in the narrative, it should be wide open, and beautiful. Blue skies would have been welcome at the start, instead of the cloying crimson visual mask.

Also, one does not know exactly how to interpret the film's monster, and the climactic scene. Two women are captured by Petr, a scarred survivor of a plane wreck, twenty years earlier. He strips them and leaves them in his den. There, they learn he is a cannibal. Finally, he returns, and kills one woman. Then, he mounts and rapes the other woman. While he is literally in mid-violent, phallic thrust, the movie simply ends.

It just stops.

We don't know if the survivor lives or dies, but more importantly the nature of the monster doesn't seem to relate to the previous information about the cave, or all the exposition about the caves from the film's beginning. At one point, early on, we are told the cave is "moaning," as if it is alive. Also, near the film's first descent, we learn that something—the cave itself?—is draining the batteries of the phones, the walkie talkies, and the helmet lights. Again, this information has absolutely nothing to do with the film's ultimate revelation about Petr as the cave-dwelling monster.

Even some of the film's best moments don't line up with the weird revelation (and abrupt conclusion) about Petr. For instance, the camera captures a terrifying moment when Hell's Pit is sealed, from above, by a huge rock, drenching the explorers below in darkness. For Petr to have moved this rock means that he would have been trapped outside the cave, since he sealed the pit. If he didn't seal the chamber, that means there is a Petr-sized tunnel somewhere which he used to re-enter the pit, and which, at some point, the explorers should have found to, similarly, escape from it.

Of course, that doesn't happen, and instead the explorers—experienced cave dwellers all—go around in circles until they are all killed, or raped.

Taken in total, *The Cavern* starts with flourishes of literacy and intelligence, and then goes right down the tubes, or right down the Hell Pit, anyway, both visually and thematically. By comparison, *The Cave* is not a great horror film, but at least it is watchable, and it connects in some way, no matter how awkwardly with its conclusion. *The Cavern* gets lost in the dark and doesn't truly earn its savage ending.

It's hard to understand how a movie that sees a cave as a "sacred place" could end on such an unnecessarily, and tangential, note of unprovoked and meaningless violence.

Cry_Wolf * * *

Critical Reception

"Following the postmodern tomfoolery of the *Scream* series, slasher movies segued into a dispiriting, if predictable cycle of remakes and pastiche efforts devoid of invention or substance. While not without its flaws, *Cry_Wolf* stands out by virtue of attempting something different from the usual irksome scenario of nubile teenagers hacked to bits by homicidal prudes. A modern variation The Boy Who Cried Wolf story, this began as a short film called *Living the Lie* that debuting director Jeff Wadlow and writer-producer Beau Bauman subsequently expanded to feature length upon winning a prize at the Chrysler Million Dollar Film Festival. Predictably dismissed by mainstream critics as another hackneyed teen slasher, the film won few fans among the horror crowd either by virtue of being almost completely bloodless."—Andrew Pragasam,

"*Cry_Wolf* is full of average acting and clichéd dialogue and has a predictable conclusion. Yet, like many of its predecessors, it plays out as a guilty pleasure. It's not terrible, and for at least part of the film it keeps us guessing. (About two-thirds of the way into the film, I whispered my prediction on the ending to a friend—I was right.)"—Mickey Ellison, *The Charlotte Gazette*: "A 'Wolf in 'Scream' Clothing," September 22, 2005, page 15D.

"Ripe with arch dialogue and the sort of catty verbal brinksmanship that one assumes passes for clever in institutions where Jon Bon Jovi is allowed to teach journalism, *Cry_Wolf* suddenly becomes downright fun when viewed as a stinging critique of post-adolescent whininess. But who wants to do that, really? At the very least I'd think some of the old red stuff would be in order, preferably spurting onto an off-white wall or getting somebody's Top-Siders all gooey. No such luck, though; Wadlow's thriller is about as bloodless an affair as you can get without hitting the dreaded PG rating."—Marc Savlov, *Austin Chronicle*, September 23, 2005.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jared Padelecki. (Tom); Lindy Booth (Dodger); Jon Bon Jovi (Rich Walker); Gary Cole (Mr. Matthews); Erica Yates (Becky); Julian Morris (Owen); Jane Beard (Miss McNally); Jesse Janzen (Randall); Paul James (Lewis); Sandra McCoy (Mercedes); Ethan Cohn (Graham); Kriti Wu (Regina); Ashley Davis (Laura).

CREW: Rogue Pictures and Hypnotic Present *Cry_Wolf*. Casting: Fern Champion. Production Designer: Martina Buckleu. Costume Designer: Alysia Raycraft. Special Effects: CIS Hollywood, Keith Vanderlaan's Captive Audience Productions. Music: Michael Wandmacher. Director of Photography: Romeo Tirone. Film Editor: Seth Lewis Gordon. Producer: Beau Bauman. Executive Producers: David Bartis, Doug Liman. Written by: Jeff Wadlow and Beau Bauman. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A new transfer to exclusive Westlake Preparatory College, Owen (Morris), joins with his roommate Tom (Padelecki) and the ginger Dodger (Booth) to play a game with other students in which they avoid suspicion and manipulate their friends using lies. Afterwards, they all decide to take their game further by suggesting that a local killer may actually be someone on campus. After using the web to spread this rumor, Owen is contacted by someone on the Internet using the name "The Wolf," who is the actual killer. When Owen's friends begin to die, he realizes that someone, perhaps the Wolf, or perhaps someone else, is playing him.

COMMENTARY: In streamlined fashion, this unassuming horror film entertainingly and accurately reflects the state of the United States in the 2000s. It taps into the prevailing zeitgeist of this era regarding both technology and public discourse. In particular, *Cry_Wolf* concerns how lies, repeated often and widely enough, are mistaken for the truth. And also, the film concerns how easy it is to spread lies using 21st-century technology. Both of these issues became a more pronounced problem in the 2010s, with the ascent of Trumpism, so-called "fake news"—meaning any news that the President doesn't like on social media platforms.

Cry_Wolf tells the cautionary story of a transfer student named Owen (Julian Morris) who ends up in over his head after playing a game of sheep and wolf. What this means is that a "shepherd" and a "wolf" get together, tell a lie, and try to weed out the sheep. After one such successful campaign in a chapel at midnight, Dodger and Owen decide to up the ante. A "townie" has been found murdered near campus, and our heroic duo decides to play "wolf" with the whole school, making up a tall tale that a serial killer is targeting students, and that he will kill again. In fact, he kills on the full moon, which is the very next weekend. Why, these pesky kids even plan their own fake demises!

But, of course, something goes terribly wrong. What proves so enjoyable about *Cry_Wolf* is the manner in which it plays so wickedly with the established slasher movie paradigm. Here the transgression is a lie, but what's fun is that the liars themselves determine the appearance of the killer. For instance, they decide their phantom bogeyman should wear camouflage and an orange ski cap. And

... he does. Red herrings also abound. One old man keeps re-appearing in shots. He's the school's custodian, and in the time-honored tradition of *Prom Night* (1980) and *Funeral Home* (1982), he's a suspect and ultimately red herring. The journalism teacher played by Jon Bon Jovi is also a suspect. It seems as though he's been a little too friendly with Dodger lately.

Basically, *every* character in this film (save one ... *the killer*) serves as the red herring for a spell. Because of the "game" set-up at the beginning of the film, everybody—to quote *Scream*—"is a suspect." This approach grants *Cry_Wolf* an air of uncertainty. We know all the clichés, but we're—excuse the pun—*dying* to know how they're all going to play out. Finally, the murder scenes in *Cry_Wolf* are inventive, and thrive more on the power of suggestion than actual on-screen violence.

The 1980s slasher films such as *Friday the 13th* dramatized a very conservative, almost Victorian morality. The teen characters who misbehaved—who smoked weed or had sex—were murdered first. It appears horror movies moved past that dynamic in the 2000s. Here, there is no real boogeyman. *Never was*. The evil, indestructible slasher was made up from whole cloth, by the protagonists' very own specifications. In other words, the enemy is *us*. Or at least those of us who would manipulate fear and lie to achieve a certain end and use technology to do so.

Cry_Wolf's central thesis "*lie to and manipulate your friends*" and "*get back at your enemies*," is exactly what happened when this country went to war in Iraq in 2003. The Administration cherry-picked intelligence and created a national fear—nay, *paranoia*—over a perceived boogeyman (Saddam Hussein). Why, Hussein was coming over here on the next full moon with mushroom clouds! Hatred for this monster was drummed up by the very people who most clearly had a vested interest in invading Iraq ("*This is the man, after all, who tried to kill my Daddy*," as President Bush said), and because of fears and lies, our country walked lockstep into a disaster, evidence and reason be damned. The Administration "cried wolf" to coin a phrase, over Iraq and fictional weapons of mass destruction, and the "sheep" (the mainstream media, the Democrats) played along. Those who spoke up against it, like Ambassador Joseph Wilson, were targeted for revenge, and his wife, a CIA operative, was outed publicly by the Bush Administration.

Think this interpretation of a horror movie is far-fetched? *Cry_Wolf* asks the question "*when does a lie become the truth?*" And it ends with a kid pulling the trigger, firing a gun, and murdering someone he has no reason to kill. But somebody else does have a reason to kill that person and uses him as a patsy to achieve their end. On the global stage, America was tricked into a war and occupation that cost it treasure and blood, all over something that was never considered true by American Intelligence or proven to be true. An Administration sold a product that it knew was wrong, to achieve an end.

In terms of technology, the film involves the way that modern communication messages such as e-mail messages can spread a lie instantaneously to vast audiences, and ones without the capacity to understand the truth, or the willingness to determine the truth for themselves. Lies are accepted by truth because so many people read them, and so many people don't challenge them.

Cry_Wolf even comments about John Edwards "two Americas," as it creates a clear social pecking order in the town that houses Westlake Prep. The students are all rich, entitled, privileged students who feel they can do anything, even play with people's lives. When confronted with his actions, Owen notes "*It was just for fun*." He has no sense of how he has harmed lives. These students are contrasted with the townies. And as Dodger, a townie notes, "*townie means trash*." She not only pretends to be a Westlake student to fit in, but she exploits others, like they do, to achieve her goals, and real power. She has learned that the way to control others is to manipulate them and lie to them.

Cursed * * ½

Critical Reception

"And while *Cursed* is a little shaky on its feet at times particularly in its final act the finished product is not the disaster cynics have been predicting. If you're up for a healthy dose of goofball humor with your gore

(and there's still enough of that left by any reasonable standard), you'll find *Cursed* to be a solid, if unspectacular, bit of entertainment."—Bernard Perusse, *CanWest News*, February 25, 2005.

"But in the end, there was nothing that could be done to make *Cursed* close to scary or close to hip. *Scream* it isn't. But watching it might just make you scream as you're running out of the theater."—Kurt L. Wolgamott, *Lincoln Journal Star*: "Craven's *Cursed* is neither scary nor hip," February 5, 2005, page 5.

"Craven's attack scenes are energetic. Eisenberg has excellent comic timing, and the saucer-eyed Ricci makes a suitably fashionable Goth heroine. The problem lies with Williamson's script, which feels as if it has been torn from different places and glued back together like a ransom note. He should have had more fun in playing with the idea of young Hollywood as a wolf pack. He does manage two promising Hollywood party scenes: a People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals fundraiser, in which everyone is encouraged to dress as a member of an endangered species, and a flashy event at the Hollywood Wax Museum, featuring a hall of mirrors and a showdown in the diva room, including waxworks of Cher, Lucy Lawless, Diana Ross and Céline Dion."—Liam Lacey, *The Globe and Mail*, February 28, 2005.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Christine Ricci (Ellie); Jesse Eisenberg (Jimmy); Shannon Elizabeth (Becky); Joshua Jackson (Jake Tyler); Portia de Rossi (Zela); Mya (Jenny); Kristine Anapau (Brooke); Daniel Mora (Jose); Solar (Zipper); Milo Ventimiglia (Bo); Johnny Acker (Earl); Eric Ladin (Louie); Derek Mears (Werewolf); Scott Baio (Himself); Craig Killborn (Himself).

CREW: Dimension Films, Outer Bank Entertainment, Carven-Maddelana Films and Kalis Productions GmbH & Co. Zweite KG present *Cursed*. Casting: Lisa Beach, Mark Bennett, Sarah Katzman, Greg Orson. Production Designer: Chris Cornwell, Bruce Alan Miller. Costume Designer: Alix Friedberg. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Howard Berger, Greg Nicotero, Patrick Tatopoulos. Music: Marco Beltrami. Director of Photography: Robert McLachlan. Film Editors: Patrick Lussier, Lisa Mozden. Producers: Marianne Maddalena, Kevin Williamson. Executive Producers: Andrew Rona, Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein, Brad Weston. Written by: Kevin Williamson. Directed by: Wes Craven. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On Mulholland Drive in Los Angeles, siblings Ellie (Ricci) and Jimmy (Eisenberg) are attacked by a werewolf after a car accident with another motorist. They soon suspect, after being wounded, that they are becoming werewolves themselves. Meanwhile, the werewolf that attacked them is continuing to commit murders in Hollywood. Jimmy believes that Jake (Jackson) could be the werewolf. But for him and his sister to be cured, the head werewolf must be located and destroyed.

COMMENTARY: *Cursed* isn't merely the name of this Wes Craven film, it is the very thing that happened to this movie. In short, the film suffered massive re-shoots, a brutal re-editing from an R rating to PG-13, and in the process utterly failed to complete its mission. What was that mission? To do for werewolf films what the team-up of Williamson and Craven had done for slashers with *Scream*. In part the difference may be a result of context. What seemed edgy and funny in the 1990s seems superficial, glib and inconsequential, post 9/11. Similarly, *Cursed* never settles on any one metaphor for the werewolf, instead selecting a grab bag of ideas, and hoping it all sticks together.

An argument might be made that *Cursed* sets out to expose Hollywood as being the true monster. At one point, that comparison is made literal as the lights of the Hollywood Hills actually form a pentagram, a mark of the beast. And, the story comes down, finally, to a woman—a "hyper skinny publicist"—as the murderous monster. It is learned that she contracted lycanthropy from a man, the alpha in the pack. "I guess there's no such thing as safe sex with a werewolf," she notes. At another point, a character observes, with disdain: "A fair fight? This is Hollywood!" the point seems to be that Tinseltown is not the land of dreams many believe, but a nightmare where the powerful abuse the weak.

Cursed—produced the Weinsteins no less—is also another notch for the "men behaving badly" trend in horror films of the 2000s. In these stories, men behaving badly gaslight and terrorize women, only to receive their comeuppance, sometimes through paranormal or supernatural means. The

homages to Hollywood (and Hollywood horror) are ubiquitous in *Cursed*, forging a strong link between men, “monsters” and Los Angeles.

There is another possibility here, too, that the film suggests. Perhaps, the monster is related to sex. Jimmy is constantly gay bashed in the film, and his persistent bully, it turns out, is gay. Meanwhile, Ellie is having problems in her relationship with Jake. And, as noted before, the publicist became a monster through unsafe sex. So, *Cursed* not only forges a link between Hollywood and monsters, but between sex and monsters as well.

Unfortunately, none of this material is especially sharp or clever, and in the last act, set in Jimmy and Ellie’s house, the script repeats, almost exactly, *Scream*’s ending of the talking villain. So, the movie feels derivative, as well as poorly thought-out. As for the special effects, they are primarily CGI, and lets just agree they won’t be giving Rick Baker’s work in *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) a run for their money any time soon.

Wes Craven is one of the genre’s greatest directors but *Cursed*—the subject of creative interference that would test the patience of a saint—is probably his worst film, other than the aborted *The Hills Have Eyes 2* (1985). Perhaps it was the film’s mission, too, that was impossible. Grafting the superficial but funny ethos of *Scream* on the werewolf genre—a very different beast—ten years after *Scream*’s premiere was likely a fool’s errand. Perhaps the most fascinating thing about *Cursed* is the way it brings back some elements of the Wolf Man myth that haven’t been seen in years (including the Mark of the Beast, or the pentagram). Perhaps a more serious-minded updated and some clarity about what the film was actually supposed to be might have ended this curse once and for all, and truly sent the modern werewolf film in a new direction

As it stands, the 2000s are a pretty mixed decade for this durable big screen monster. Werewolves are rendered with terrible CGI in films such as *Underworld* and *Twilight* and treated glibly in *Cursed*. Contrarily, *Ginger Snaps* and *Dog Soldiers*, both rethink the long-standing boogeyman (or bogeywoman, as the case may be) in ways that reinvigorate the story.

Dark Water ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“Sleek and scary, if a bit of a snore.”—Thelma Adams, *Us Magazine*, July 25, 2005 page 85.

“Described by Murray as having been built during the 1970s in ‘the Brutalist style,’ the building exhibits that approach’s devotion to raw concrete and blockish, geometric shapes, spiked with Gothic oddities. Therese DePrez’s ... noir-stained production design suggests urban decay fueled by industrial neglect. Shot by cinematographer Affonso Beato, a frequent collaborator of Pedro Almodovar, the visuals send a cold, wet chill down your spine.”—Kevin Crust, *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 2005, E1.

“Like much contemporary Japanese horror, Nakata’s works tend to have an abstract, dreamlike quality seemingly at odds with mainstream Hollywood’s penchant for focus group-tested blatancy. All of which might explain the captivating, mesmerizing and ultimately frustrating muddle that is *Dark Water*, an ambitious attempt at psychological horror that winds up being a bit of a murky mess.”—Rick Gershman, *St. Petersburg Times*, July 7, 2005.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jennifer Connelly (Dahlia); John C. Reilly (Mr. Murray); Tim Roth (Jeff Platzer); Dougray Scott (Kyle); Pete Postlethwaite (Veeck); Camryn Manheim (Teacher); Ariel Gade (Ceci); Peria Haney-Jardine (Natasha/Young Dahlia); Debra Monk (Young Dahlia’s Teacher); Linda Edmond, Bill Buell (Mediator); Elina Lowensohn (Dahlia’s Mother).

CREW: Buena Vista Pictures, Touchstone Pictures, Pandemonium, Vertigo Entertainment and Post No Bills Films present *Dark Water*. Casting: Mali Finn, Tina Gerussim, Kelli Lerner, Carole Tarlington. Production Designer: Therese DePrez. Costume Designer: Michael Wilkinson. Special Effects: Digital Domain, Flash Film Works, Effects Group. Music: Angelo Badalamenti. Director of Photography: Affonso Beato. Film Editor: Daniel Rezende. Producers: Doug Davison, Roy Lee, Bill Mechanic. Executive Producers: Kerry Foster, Ashley Kramer. Based on the novel by: Koji Zuzuki. Based on the film from Hideo Nakata, Takashige Ichise. Written by: Rafael Yglesias. Directed by: Walter Salles. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the midst of an acrimonious divorce, soon-to-be single mother Dahlia (Connelly) moves with her young daughter, Cecilia (Gade), from Jersey City to Roosevelt Island. Her husband, who is having an affair, threatens to sue if she doesn’t return to New Jersey, but Dahlia stands her ground. Dahlia and Cecilia move into a rundown old apartment building managed by an unresponsive landlord, Mr. Murray (Reilly), and in unit 9F begin to experience unpleasant living conditions. Dahlia hears noises from the vacant apartment above at all hours of the night and is faced with a disgusting stain on her bedroom ceiling that seems to expand continuously. The building’s handyman, Mr. Veeck (Postlethwaite), is also slow to repair the stain and surrounding leak, and the problem grows from worse to unmanageable. After visiting the roof and a water tower there, Cecilia makes the acquaintance of an imaginary friend named Natasha, who also lives in the building. But as Dahlia soon learns, Natasha is not so imaginary at all. Rather, she is in the insistent spirit of a child who was abandoned by her parents and left to a cruel fate in the very building that Cecie and Dahlia now inhabit.

COMMENTARY: It’s not the supernatural world we should fear, it’s this one. That’s the underlying conceit of the 2005 horror remake *Dark Water*, a work based on both a novel and the 2002 Japanese film from Hideo Nakato. In keeping with this disturbing leitmotif, *Dark Water*’s visual palette is veritably overwhelmed by sickly green coloring, and protagonist Jennifer Connelly is beset from real-life strife on all sides. She plays a woman, Dahlia, undergoing a nasty divorce and taking care of her young child at the same time. Meanwhile, Dahlia’s new landlord, played by John C. Reilly, is a serial procrastinator and

liar, and her lawyer is not exactly on the up-and-up, either. In fact, the film depicts a universe in which the whole “game of life” is rigged, from the word of the law, which prevents people from helping Dahlia, to matters of family connection. On the latter front, Dahlia was abandoned by her mother when she was but a small child. Clearly, *Dark Water* is not a light film, but insofar as Dahlia definitely breaks the cycle of parental neglect for her cute-as-a-button daughter, Cecilia (Ariel Gade) during the denouement, the movie offers, at the end, some glimmer of hope, if not sunshine.

Unlike other Japanese horror remakes, *Dark Water* doesn't concern, at least directly, the spread of a personal horror through the auspices of modern technology. Instead, it suggests that the wrongs of this world can live on in the next, begging for redress. Still, *Dark Water* features a number of narrative commonalities with *The Ring* (2002) that are worthy of mention. Again, the audience meets a single mother and her child as focal points of identification. And again, a female child with long hair serves as the specter of the supernatural. In both cases, this avenger wishes—*needs*—to be heard. Death by drowning is also a significant plot-point in both *Dark Water* and *The Ring*. Perhaps these similarities exist because both films originated as stories by Koji Suzuki.

But *Dark Water's* lugubrious, haunting value as a work of art emerges not from its all-too-familiar view of the supernatural, but rather from the film's absolutely caustic, cynical view of our world as a sick place of exploitation and lies. The film's production design performs much of the heavy lifting in terms of transmitting that thematic point. The pervasive visuals of 21st-century infrastructure decay and the close-up look at the spoiling of a building that was once a “*utopia*” forge a suffocating, oppressive vibe that haunts Dahlia as much as does the film's child ghost. Possessing a kind of unearthly, ethereal brand of beauty, Connelly thrives in this squalor-soaked environment, easily capturing audience affection and forging a deep emotional connection with us through her character's unceasing, Joan of Arc-like travails and suffering. Dahlia represents a point of delicate beauty, grace and sympathy in a world of seedy wretchedness, and her journey ultimately makes the film not merely worthwhile, but unforgettable.

Not inappropriately given its title, *Dark Water* visualizes a universe of perpetual rainfall, as though the Heavens themselves weep for Natasha, Dahlia and the children of the world who have been neglected by parents and by society. At one point, Dahlia's estranged husband asks her to be honest with herself and says that she can't raise Cecilia alone.

And that's sort of the point: *no one should have to*.

We have a society and a support system for parents, don't we? Shouldn't we? Yet in terms of society and the aforementioned it-takes-a-village support system, the film introduces us to lying landlords, deceitful lawyers and useless social workers and counselors. The world itself is a sick, corrupt realm in the film and one stain in particular—the *stain of parental neglect*—keeps growing wider and deeper, forever untended in a society in which the act of helping another person is an alien thing. The audience sees the absence of love, help and connection in this world through Dahlia's frequent interfaces with Murray and the building staff. To state that these interactions are frustrating is an understatement. Murray often makes promises to Dahlia to solve her problems, but rarely delivers unless forced by authorities, like her lawyer, to deliver on them. Similarly, an employee working the front desk won't leave his position to help Dahlia with looters/hooligans in the apartment above hers, 10F, because it is against the rules to vacate his position, and he could lose his job. He is looking out for himself, not for the tenants of the building, and certainly not for Dahlia. Likewise, Veek, the building super, won't fix a catastrophic plumbing issue because he isn't, technically, a plumber, and the union will be on the landlord's back if he does the work. Therefore, the work doesn't get done, and Dahlia sees no resolution of the problem. Finally, even a marriage counselor can't recommend a good divorce lawyer to Dahlia for fear of litigation if she chooses sides in the divorce dispute.

Repeatedly, the issue in *Dark Water* is the same: everyone is afraid to help out and will only do so if instructed by some higher authority like a union, law enforcement, or the judicial system. Dahlia faces catastrophic problems in her life, and no one will reach out with a helping hand. The social safety net is non-existent, or so flummoxed by byzantine rules as to be non-existent. The crumbling bureaucracy surrounding her—*represented by the spoiled apartment building*—has robbed the community of its human desire, its human spirit, to be helpful. And of course, none of this represents an uncommon state

of affairs for Dahlia. Her mother saved her as a child, leaving her to weather life's storms alone. She knows the rules, and so Dahlia's heroic journey in the film explicitly involves her ability and willingness to do what others have always refused to do for her.

Help.

Despite all those who have wronged her, from her husband to her lawyer to her landlord, Dahlia reaches out to a dead girl, Natasha, and attempts to heal her. At the same time, this act saves Cecilia's life. The film's final scene, set in an elevator, suggests that even absent from the mortal coil in physical form, Dahlia will be with Cecilia, will be "*her mother ... forever.*" She breaks the societal cycle of neglect and, in sacrificing her very life, saves two children and their respective and quite different futures. The order Dahlia brings to Cecilia's disordered life is immediately evident, and nicely visualized. She (invisibly) braids Cecilia's hair, an act of attention and devotion that promises the child her continued presence, going forward. For all intents and purposes, *Dark Water* is really a story of "*you and me against the world,*" to quote Anne Murray (or was it Helen Reddy?). Although she has had no respite from life's savagery and setbacks, Dahlia nonetheless shelters two girls from it, the best she can. And the world she fights, in this case, is visualized as a wet, stained, sickly, dehumanized place.

Built in 1976, Dahlia's building was designed as a "utopia" but more closely resembles a public housing block in communist Russia. Look out the window and you can only see more building, more people trapped inside, with you. The sickly green of the walls, corridors, basement and laundry room suggest a 1940s insane asylum, and architectural inhumanity on an industrial scale. Like the stain on Dahlia's ceiling, the green "infection" of inhumanity colors everything in the film.

In diagramming an unhappy world, *Dark Water* offers a unique dynamic. Here, in "real life," Dahlia must reckon with an adulterous husband and a bitter divorce, an apartment—a home—that is falling apart in every corner, and a legal system that seems remote and stacked against her. By contrast, the supernatural world, through frightening at first, is all about connection. Dahlia must reach out for a child's hand, even if it isn't her own child's hand. She must pay attention to a child where the world had forsaken its responsibility to do so. Dahlia chooses to die, in essence, but she also chooses to bridge the gap, to heal the wound, separating worlds. She closes the breach. She takes the step that society won't and makes the situation better. In some sense, Dahlia could be seen as a saintly or pro-social representation of Motherhood. But in another sense her sacrifice is also Christ-like. Dahlia takes responsibility for the world's neglected children, essentially, and doesn't hew only to the love of her own child, Ceci. She sees another child (representing the whole of society) as her responsibility as well.

The Ring is a terrifying commentary on the ways that modern technology and media spread personal suffering to the masses. *The Grudge* is a winding, snake-eating-its-tail story about the ways emotional rage can devour even innocent bystanders. And *Pulse* is a critique of the way that we believe that human connection is forged, not face-to-face, but through the Internet and a computer keyboard. In pointed contrast, *Dark Water* is a sedentary, buttoned-down bleak study of the cold, damp, inhuman and inhumane world we have made for ourselves.

The supernatural is not the real terror here, but it might be a respite from the rain.

The Devil's Rejects * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"*Devil's Rejects* doesn't so much play out as a sequel to *House of 1000 Corpses* but as a recapitulation—a faster, cheaper, more out-of-control grindhouse shout-out."—Ed Gonzalez, *Slant Magazine*, June 1, 2005.

"...we get a lot of dialogue among the three family members, and not a lot of killing. There is a long sequence in the middle that finds the family holding a traveling band of country-musicians hostage in a motel, but mostly the movie is about a single-minded sheriff (William Forsythe) and his pursuit of the family. Zombie still knows exactly how to make his movie look like one of the '70s exploitation classics, with liberal doses of

freeze frames, wipes and mustaches, plus one hell of a kickin' '70s soundtrack."—Josh Bell, *Las Vegas Weekly*, July 21, 2005.

"...a thrill ride that's overflowing with gritty gore, charismatic carnage, and some truly twisted turns, not to mention some insta-quotable dialogue ('*Don't you never turn your back on a fuckin' clown when he's talkin' to you!*') and a soundtrack that is pitch perfect for the beats Zombie is looking to hit throughout this tormented tale."—Andrew Pollard, *Starburst Magazine*, August 11, 2017.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Sid Haig (Captain Spaulding); Bill Moseley (Otis); Sheri Moon Zombie (Baby); William Forsythe (Sheriff Wydell); Ken Foree (Charles Altamont); Matthew McGrory (Tiny); Leslie Easterbrook (Mother Firefly); Geoffrey Lewis (Roy Sullivan); Priscilla Barnes (Gloria Sullivan); David Sheridan (Officer Ray Dobson); Kate Norby (Wendy Banjo); Lew Temple (Adam Banjo); Danny Trejo (Rondo); EG Daily (Candy); Tom Towles (George Wydell); Michael Berryman (Clevon); P.J. Soles (Susan); Deborah Van Valkenburgh (Casey); Mary Woronov (Abbie).

CREW: Lions Gate Films and Cinterenta Present, in association with Cinelamda Internationale, Entache Entertainment, Firm Films and Spectacle Entertainment Group, *The Devil's Rejects*. Casting: Monika Mikkelsen. Costume Designer: Yasmine Abraham. Production Designer: Anthony Tremblay. Music: Tyler Bates. Director of Photography: Phil Parmet. Film Editor: Glenn Garland. Producers: Mike Elliott, Andy Gould, Marco Mehlitz, Michael Ohoven. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Michael Burns, Guy Oseary, Michael Paseornek, Julie Yorn, Rob Zombie. Written and Directed by: Rob Zombie. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Local police raid the Firefly farm and a shoot-out ensues between the legal authorities and the family of murderous psychopaths. Mother Firefly (Easterbrook) is apprehended, while Baby (Moon-Zombie) and Otis (Moseley) escape the grounds to rendezvous with Captain Spaulding (Haig). A determined and obsessed sheriff, Wydell (Forsythe) swears vengeance on the family after learning that it murdered his brother (Towles). Wydell hunts down the so-called "devil's rejects," as they torture, maim and murder the innocent members of a local band at a nearby motel.

COMMENTARY: For some fans and critics, Rob Zombie's *The Devil's Rejects* is the director's absolute masterpiece. It is easy to see why this assessment is popular. The film features a remarkable cast including Sid Haig, William Forsyth, Ken Foree, Michael Berryman, Priscilla Barnes, Leslie Easterbrook and more. They all give the movie their kinky, twisted all. Similarly, Zombie has clearly grown as a filmmaker since *House of 1,000 Corpses*, and that film lost some of its luster through editing choices and the usage of odd "flashes" to transition from one scene to the next. Those techniques are gone here. Instead, *The Devil's Rejects* deploys freeze frames, wipes, slow-motion photography, and montages set to great 1970s tunes, like "Free Bird." This movie actually feels like a sleazy, 1970s grindhouse effort, and wins points for achieving that vibe authentically.

In short, *The Devil's Reject* looks great. It sounds great. It is affecting even, because of its style, choice of music, and overall *Bonnie and Clyde*-type story, of fugitives on-the-run from corrupt, vigilante justice, embodied by Forsyth's sheriff, Wydell.



Tiny's last stand, outside the Firefly compound. Matthew McGrory stars in *The Devil's Rejects* (2005).

Yet underneath all these flourishes is a fact of some discomfort that the movie's incredible and carefully wrought style simply can't overcome. It is not about kindly, somewhat hapless criminals railing against a corrupt system, as one might aptly describe *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967) or even *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), other efforts about individuals fighting hopeless odds against the system. Instead, *The Devil's Rejects* concerns the most horrible, brutal, sadistic people imaginable. Baby, Otis, Captain Spaulding and even Mother Firefly are psychotic killers who maim, torture and murder innocent people for no reason other than their own delight. They do not stand opposed to a corrupt system for some ideological reason. They are not part of any Resistance. Again, in *Bonnie & Clyde*, the crooks robbed banks during the Great Depression, and the banks had foreclosed on the homes and properties of innocent American families, on farmers struggling to make ends meet. Butch and Sundance, similarly, found themselves a part of an increasingly technological society (as represented by both the bicycle and the train featured in the film), that had begun to dehumanize the individual. In both cases, audiences rooted for the anti-heroes because they targeted the rich, the elite, the corrupt. They were struggling to find their place in a new world order that, it seemed, could not include them.

But look at what the Firefly family does in *The Devil's Rejects*. They sadistically torture and ultimately murder innocent Americans. For the heck of it! Their randomly selected victims have done nothing to deserve this. They just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

And authority, as represented by Wydell, is just as corrupt and monstrous as the quarry he hunts. Indeed, *The Devil's Rejects* may just be another notable 2000s example of the theme, also seen in *Pitch Black* (2000), *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), *AVP* (2004), and *AVPR* (2007) that "evil must fight evil." And again, that notion has an important resonance in the 2000s, as America dropped all pretenses of subscribing to high ideals to battle the terrorists who had attacked it on 9/11. Instead, individuals picked up on the battlefield were locked away in perpetuity, without trial, at Guantanamo Bay, and stripped of the protections of the Geneva Convention. Prisoners were subjected to torture, though it was euphemistically referred to as "enhanced interrogation techniques," and brutalized in prisons such as Abu Ghraib. Furthermore, new theaters in the War on Terror, like Iraq, had not attacked America, and the threats were ginned up, or lied about, to get buy in from the American citizenry for aggressive action. America went dark to fight darkness, rather than bringing light to that darkness.



On the road again. The Firefly clan (left to right, Sheri Moon-Zombie, Sid Haig, and Bill Moseley) heads to a fateful encounter in Rob Zombie's sequel *The Devil's Rejects* (2005).

So, perhaps it is not a surprise that so many horror films of the era adopt the paradigm of the time. There is no good anymore. Just competing, relative evils.

But the problem is that *The Devil's Rejects* lingers on the torture of such innocents as Priscilla Barnes' character, and then wants to pluck at the heartstrings of the audience when the Firefly family gets its comeuppance for such murderous lawlessness. Leading up the fatal final confrontation on the road, for example, Zombie cuts to flashbacks of Otis, Baby and Captain Spaulding laughing and goofing together, as if they are sweet friends, getting a good laugh from one another.

Aw, they're buddies! They're family! Look at them in this heart-warming montage!

However, it is in this heart-tugging montage, and this heart-tugging montage alone, that the featured Firefly characters appear to even like each other. They spend the rest of the film bickering, fighting, and yelling at one another in the foulest language imaginable. And yet, as these thoroughly unlikable characters are about to meet their doom, we're supposed to feel nostalgia and happiness, and wistfulness over the good times they shared together?

Good times that, as an audience, we were never witness to? Not even once?

Talk about manipulation.

Zombie can't have it both ways, though he certainly tries to do so. He can't wallow in the monstrous behavior of his protagonists, the Firefly family, and then turnaround and try to paint them as sweet buddies who face a tragic end.

That's a switch that comes so hard the audience gets whiplash. It doesn't make it better that the final shoot out is edited to "Free Bird," which features the lyrics "*this bird you cannot change*." Clearly, the Fireflies are meant to be such noble birds, ones whose feathers can never change. They are brave and unchanging in their nobility, right?

Er, wrong.

Their nature is monstrous. It isn't noble. The heart-warming montage is not earned.

The failure to acknowledge the fact of the Firefly family's psychosis and sadism creates some cognitive dissonance in the film. For instance, late in the proceedings, Wydell hunts down Baby like she is the heroic final girl and he is the monster, in a traditional slasher flick. Again, Baby is a psychotic murderer, so why should the audience, ultimately, care about her facing the same kind of fate she carelessly meted to so many others?

In this book, I often complain about films that feature violence but no social commentary about that violence. Some torture porn films, such as *See No Evil* are especially notorious for this flaw. But in a way, *The Devil's Rejects* is worse because it wants to depict its heroes committing horrible atrocities, and then gain the audience's sympathies for the same characters' suffering. Not to get on a high horse about it, but *The Devil's Rejects* is truly an immoral horror film, because it asks the audience to sympathize with the scum of the Earth.

The Devil's Rejects isn't even aligned well, continuity-wise, with *House of 1,000 Corpses*. There, the Firefly family for some reason served a subterranean master, the scarifying brain surgeon, Dr. Satan. Here, there is no mention of Dr. Satan by authorities, or by the family. What happened to him? Why has he vanished, all the sudden, from reality? Dr. Satan was one of the most horrifying components of the first film, and yet is totally abandoned and unacknowledged in this sequel. This film seems to occur in a parallel universe in which Dr. Satan, his victims, and his association with the Firefly family simply doesn't exist.

This author is not a Rob Zombie hater, as hopefully reviews for *Halloween* and *Halloween II* establish. And, it is abundantly plain that *The Devil's Rejects* is beautifully acted, shot, scored and edited. But its characters are repugnant, and the director's attempt to make the audience sympathize for them, after establishing their horrid nature, feels even more repugnant. The movie's last scene is unforgettable. It is a perfect union of musical score, location shooting, and effective editing. But it also a manipulative lie.

You don't sympathize with the home invaders in *The Strangers*, do you? You don't sympathize with Dr. Satan in *House of 1,000 Corpses*, right? In *Deliverance* (1972), audiences aren't asked to romanticize the hillbilly rapists, are they?

The Firefly family is a group of (admittedly memorable) monsters. But *The Devil's Rejects* ignores that they are, in the end, monsters.

That's one trick Zombie just can't pull off.

LEGACY: Captain Spaulding, Baby, and Otis returned in the finale of the Firefly trilogy, *Rob Zombie's 3 From Hell* (2019). Intriguingly, that effort tried to recast the Firefly family as protesters of a corrupt system.

Dominion: The Prequel to the Exorcist ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Is it better than Harlin's? Certainly. Is it a good film? Not entirely. And the Hitchcockian surreal dream sequence simply doesn't work. But it does take evil seriously rather than as an excuse for special effects, and it does seek to make you think. No wonder the studio hated it."—Mike Davies, *Birmingham Post*, November 11, 2005, page 13.

"Fans of the 1973 original won't care about the tale's murky East African origins here (no whirling heads or vomit), and young scary-movie buffs will be bored. What's left are critics and art-house devotees who'll enjoy comparing the two as an auteurist game, but that's about the only edification to be had."—Ken Tucker, *New York*, May 23, 2005, page 68.

"The contrast is most evident in the ultimate confrontation between the priest and a possessed person, which Harlin staged as an effects blowout but Schrader presents as a learned philosophical colloquy between Merrin and the demon (here looking rather like a bald levitating swami wearing a loincloth) about the human condition. *Dominion* is a languid, gloomy, rather simpleminded rumination on unhappiness and guilt rather than a shocker showcasing CGI fireworks, but while Schrader's attempt to present an ethical debate on morality might have been admirable, the film turns out to be dramatically flat, lacking both intellectual heft and scares."—F Swietek, *The Video Librarian*, November 1, 2005.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Stellan Skarsgård (Father Lankester Merrin); Gabriel Mann (Father Francis); Clara Bellar (Rachel Lesno); Billy Crawford (Cheche); Ralph Brown (Sergeant Major); Israel Aduramo (Jomo); Andrew French (Chuma); Antonie Kamerling (Kessel); Julian Wadham (Major Granville); Eddie Osei (Emekwi); Ilario Bisi-Pedro (Sebituana); Niall Refoy (Corporal); Lorenzo Camporese (Private); Burt Caesar (Dr. Lamu).

CREW: Warner Bros. and Morgan Creek Productions present *Dominion: The Prequel to The Exorcist*. Casting: Pam Dixon. Production Designer: John Graysmark. Costume Designer: Luke Reichle. Special Effects: Eden FX, KNB EFX Group. Music: Angelo Badalamenti, Trevor Rabin, Dog Fashion Disco. Director of Photography: Vittorio Storaro. Film Editor: Tim Silano. Producer: James G. Robinson. Executive Producers: Guy McElwaine, David C. Robinson. Based on characters created by: William Peter Blatty. Written by: William Wisher and Caleb Carr. Directed by: Paul Schrader. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 117 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After a traumatic event in Holland in 1944, Catholic Priest Lankester Merrin (Skarsgård) buries himself in his archaeological work. In 1947, he toils in British Africa. There, he discovers a strange, buried church deep beneath the desert sands. Inside, imagery of Lucifer, the "most perfect of the angels" is everywhere. As British officers occupy the land and have a conflict with the locals, Merrin sees the similarities to the event that occurred in Holland, which involved the Nazi occupation there. And, strangely, a local child seems to become possessed by a dark force, a fact which requires Merrin no longer to hide from the world and his calling, but to resume his work as a Catholic priest.

COMMENTARY: No matter who wins, we lose. Or, to apply that precept to the long-lived but deeply inconsistent *Exorcist* franchise, there are no winners in the 2000s sweepstakes to forge a prequel to the

beloved and iconic Friedkin film of the 1970s. To briefly recap, the making of a new chapter in the *Exorcist* saga was a big story in the 2000s. Esteemed, critically acclaimed auteur Paul Schrader had been hired to direct a prequel to the original film, one that would focus on the early life of Father Merrin. However, this cerebral and thoughtful artist knowingly took a “high” road approach to the genre material that did not comport with the studio’s expectations of horror, gore and violence.

Accordingly, Renny Harlin—director of *A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master* (1988), *Deep Blue Sea* (1999) and other horror movies—was then hired to finish the (more conventional) horror film. Harlin’s final product, released as *Exorcist: The Beginning*, was more of a reshoot, however, featuring re-casting, re-writing and entirely new sequences.

That film was poorly reviewed, which resulted in fans and critics wanting to see Schrader’s original version, which was then released as *Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist*, and, still, pleased few. Basically, what happened to Zack Snyder’s *Justice League* in 2017 occurred a decade earlier with *The Exorcist* prequel. Fans were unhappy with a theatrical cut (in that case, one from geek guru Joss Whedon), and clamored for the release of the original Snyder cut. In the case of *The Exorcist*, as noted above, there is no clear winner or loser. Schrader’s film is perhaps more thoughtful, but it is dull and uneventful for the most part. The horror aspects of it rarely work. Harlin’s film brings on the horror and moves a little faster, but still isn’t a very good film. In both cases, the directors fail to live up to the quality of the original film, a fact which makes the whole intricate story an exercise in futility.

Both versions of this story involve the discovery and unearthing of a 5th-century temple in the sand, and a key question the temple raises: was it buried deliberately by its builders? The temple itself is decorated with a relief of Lucifer, which makes it, ostensibly, evil. Surely enough, a local boy is soon possessed, and Merrin must free him. But the fact of the matter is that Schrader’s film is much more interested in human evil, which the director pinpoints as pervasive in wartime, and, specifically, during foreign occupation. “*We all must make our little deals with the devil*,” a supervisor tells Merrin, and the point is that occupation is an event that encourages such deals. Although Merrin’s precept is that “*cruelty is never necessary*,” the occupiers must keep entire countries in line, and the way to do that is through brute force.

The film’s opening sequence in Holland finds Nazi soldiers tormenting local townsfolk. In particular, a Nazi officer threatens to murder ten townspeople in punishment for the death of an officer, unless Merrin chooses which of his neighbors to kill. Merrin makes that choice, singling out someone for death. Naturally, Merrin is haunted by this act, and the opening scene is an atmospheric one of human evil, for certain, set in a kind of wintry world that contrasts strongly with the film’s central desert setting, thus proving that evil knows no territorial bounds. Later in the film, the British officers occupying the desert substitute for the Nazis in a scene that is a direct re-creation of the preamble in Holland. It is not difficult, in the mid-2000s, to detect a real life corollary, or recognize Schrader’s social commentary, with America and its Coalition of the Willing occupying Iraq during the War on Terror. Evil is the control and domination (dominion?) over innocent people in their own homes, no matter the ideology that is behind that occupation, the film intimates. The problem, perhaps, is that the film’s structure is a bit on the nose, with Merrin facing an identical moral situation in a span of a few years. Also, as noted above, this situation speaks not directly to an evil outside the human race (the bread and butter of the *Exorcist* films), but rather a most human form of evil. Men possess free will, and this is how they use it? By warring and murdering, and slaughtering the innocent? That is the film’s central argument, and it is not bad terrain for a horror film, but it is also a kind of oblique or tangential story to tell as an origin story for Merrin. He eventually sees his faith restored by his mission to free the boy from the demon’s grip, but one can’t help but feel this story undercuts the other story.

Man is terrible and murderous, the film seems to say, but when the Devil is involved, all bets are off (and man’s sins don’t look so bad). Schrader is a craftsman and a moralist, but the problems with this film come right down to the story. All the information about Merrin’s trauma in Holland are off point, except as social commentary for the time, and don’t contribute to the development of his character. The early encounter with a demon, however, sets up the confrontation in Friedkin’s film. “*The demon is your enemy now*,” Merrin is told near the conclusion of the film, “*And he will pursue you*.”

This, perhaps, is the story the film ought to have focused more on, though ostensibly it would not have been interest to Schrader, a filmmaker who prefers to delve into moral nuance and shades of gray. Two points there: *The Exorcist* may not be the place for that meditation, given 25 years of history and pent up expectation for a legitimate follow-up. And secondly, the studio should have known what kind of film Schrader planned to deliver, based on the screenplay. The fact of the matter is that this prequel is not as strong or disturbing a film as *The Exorcist* or *Exorcist III* (1990), and not as wild or bizarre a film, even, as Boorman's *The Heretic* (1977). At least Boorman's film, for all its strangeness, is never dull. No doubt the intent here was to build an atmosphere of slow-burning terror, but the heat simply never gets turned up.

Dominion: Prequel to The Exorcist is an unfinished film, too, which takes away from the high-minded dignity it seeks to convey in its intellectual musings. CGI jackals and lions are poorly rendered, and levitations and other special effects depicting the possessed boy are similarly uninspiring. It's not just that there is no big show at the film's end worth slogging through all the other material, it is that the possession is poorly and ineptly staged, as though Schrader is simply uninterested in this aspect of his material. Told as if in a long, dreamy trance, with lugubrious, internal performances and a lack of dramatic incidents, *Dominion: Prequel to The Exorcist* is not the lost jewel unearthed that many hoped it would be. Again, to quote the film, this movie is a "weak vessel" to succeed Friedkin's masterpiece, and, well, "a weak vessel leaks."

Doom ★ 1/2

Critical Reception

"*Doom* is dreary-looking and painfully slow, but it's not terrible. Even if Andrzej Bartkowiak's direction never rises above straight-to-video schlock (the film's look and tempo are intensely *Highlander III: The Sorcerer*), the screenplay by David Callaham and the veteran Wesley Strick supplies enough tolerable ridiculousness to make up for the pitiful absence of suspense."—Wesley Morris, *Boston Globe*: "*Doom* too often plays by the rules," October 21, 2005, page D9.

"David Callaham, who wrote the screenplay, was 15 when the game burst on the scene. One would think he might have played it, at least once, and would understand why it was important. Callaham seems to think people still play Pong. His one nod to the first-person shooter comes way too late in the film and lasts only a few minutes—the best few minutes of the movie."—Chase Squires, *St. Petersburg Press*: "*Doom* and Gloom," October 21, 2005, page 3E.

"First-person shooter gamers worth their salt know that the movie incorporates FPS viewpoints and it does so towards the end. The sequences are so good, they make me feel like grabbing my optical mouse and keyboard in order to aid the movie's hero in dispatching [sic] hellish monsters."—Faiz Ahmas, *New Strait Times*, October 27, 2005, page 16.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Karl Urban (John Grimm); Rosamund Pike (Samantha Grimm); Dwayne Johnson (Sarge); DeObia Oparei (Destroyer); Ben Daniels (Goat); Raz Adoti (Duke); Richard Brake (Portman); Al Weaver (The Kid); Dexter Fletcher (Pinky); Briane Steele (Hell Knight). Yao Chin (Mac); Robert Russell (Dr. Carnack); Daniel York (Lt. Huengs). Ian Hughes (Sanford Crosby); Sara Houghton (Dr. Willitts).

CREW: John Wells Productions, Di Bonaventura Pictures, Doom Productions, Stillking Films, Reaper Productions and Distant Planet Productions Present *Doom*. Casting: Jina Jay. Production Designer: Stephen Scott. Costume Designer: Carlo Poggioli. Special Effects: DDT SFX, Stan Winston Studio, Framestore CFC, Double Negative. Music: Clint Mansell. Director of Photography: Tony Pierce-Roberts. Film Editing: Derek G. Brechin. Based on the video game *Doom*. Story by: David Callaham. Written by: David Callaham, Wesley Strick. Directed by: Andrzej Bartkowiak. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 2046, a rapid response military team under the taciturn Sarge (Johnson) must travel through a portal called the Ark to the Olduvai Research Center on Mars. There, something has gone terribly wrong at the laboratory, and alien monsters invade the facility. For one soldier, John Grimm (Urban), this mission becomes personal because his estranged sister, Samantha (Pike) is also stationed at the facility.

COMMENTARY: Back in 1993, the video game called *Doom* popularized a brand of video gameplay known as the *first-person shooter*. In this type of game, the player looks down his or her body at a weapon, and beyond that, in halls, forests, corridors, laboratories and other settings, confronts monsters and enemies to shoot. This movie, *Doom*, is an adaptation of the popular game, but long-time horror fans will note that the narrative harks back to earlier, cinematic sources—first and foremost, the 1986 James Cameron epic, *Aliens*.

That great film sent Sigourney Weaver and a squad of marines to a distant world, where the team battles drooling, monstrous xenomorphs. It is probably still, thirty-five years later, the greatest cinematic tale of a diverse team in a remote location battling an implacable foe. *Doom* is an amalgamation of at least a half-dozen such “*space monster*” movies from the 1980s (all of which were likely inspired by Ridley Scott’s 1979 film *Alien*. Which in turn was likely derived from *Planet of the Vampires*. Which may have been inspired by *It! The Terror from Beyond Space*). Regardless, the opener in *Doom*, featuring doomed scientists on the run in darkly lit corridors, may remind you of the prologue to Roger Corman’s cheap-jack *Galaxy of Terror* (1981). The central setting, an archaeological dig on an alien world, is also highly reminiscent of *Inseminoid* (1982), known in some circles as *Horror Planet*. The gung-ho military types on display here reek of Hudson, Hicks, Vasquez and the other characters you loved in *Aliens* (but you will hate here.) Why, there’s even “*one tough hombre*” here who makes bad “*pussy*” jokes while riding in helicopters, a not-so-subtle homage to *Predator* (1987). Although Klaus Kinski—sadly—is not in *Doom*, the knowledgeable viewer may also detect resonances of *Creature* (1985) in the screenplay, particularly in the way the dead return to life here, with a new and evil agenda.

But in the case of *Doom*, the problem is that you’ve seen and heard every piece of this clichéd tale before. If it were handled exceptionally well this time, or the film felt exceptionally tense and frightening, we could forgive the hackneyed story instead of laughing at the predictable chestnuts that get dropped in. *Doom*’s plot involves a search and destroy mission on Mars in the year 2046. A research laboratory working on “archaeology,” “genetics,” and “weapons research” issues a quarantine after some weird monsters break loose and kill off a lot of white coated scientists. The space marines—an outfit called RRTS (or is it S.T.A.R.S.?)—led by Sarge (The Rock) are thus assigned to head to Mars via an alien stargate called “The Ark” and keep the monsters from coming through and invading Earth.

The characters have names like Kid, Destroyer, Reaper and Goat, and wear “killcams,” etc. As this kind of plot requires, they are differentiated only in the most rudimentary terms. Portman, for instance, is an asshole. He’s the group idiot/betrayer (think Ash in *Alien*, Burke in *Aliens*, Kinski in *Creature*, etc.) All the soldiers also get hysterical a little too easily once faced with monsters, as though the writers have forgotten that these tough hombres are professional soldiers.

Where’s the level-headed Ripley when you need her?

Despite the cardboard cut-outs on hand in the film there is an impressive scene here in which Destroyer fights a monster in a holding cell in hand-to-hand combat. Particularly fun is the moment in which he uses a computer monitor like a bola and whacks the drooling beast with it. Truth be told, the whole “Nano Wall” gimmick is fun too.

But there’s little genuine suspense in *Doom*; less plot development, and the cinematographer seems to know precisely one move: *the lunge!* Whenever The Rock and the other macho men get in each other’s faces about how bad things are going, the camera lunges forward approximately three steps; so as to make the confrontation seem more powerful. This dance step gets old after about the twentieth time.

Doom’s dialogue is atrocious too. “*I guess you gotta face your demons some time*” is the kind of wisdom offered up, as if ironically. Worse, the film’s idea of romance is to have The Rock stare lovingly

(eyes bulging) at an oversized machine gun (“a big fucking gun,” as the script calls it), while the camera circles the couple.

Of course, let's face it, nobody sees a movie like *Doom* for dialogue or romance or even irony, just some good old-fashioned monster killing! Accomplish that modest task with a modicum of cleverness and action, and many fans will feel satisfied. Yet in *Doom* the monsters look really rubbery and stupid. They inspire no fear and have no menace. And the film suffers from poor pacing. Most of the fights aren't exciting. Instead, an inordinate amount of *Doom*'s running time is spent with the camera and characters navigating dark corridors. The sounds of heavy breathing, creature snarls and guns cocking dominate the soundtrack. Then ... nothing happens.

The game was never this dull.

And though there is a brief thrill when the movie adopts the famous first-person shooter pose of the game itself, that thrill soon wears off.

And, finally, though this observation will earn the author no friends, Dwayne Johnson can't act. He's as flat and unimpressive as the other aspects of this film.

The Exorcism of Emily Rose ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“Entertaining, but don't expect it to be another *Exorcist*”—Mark Adams, *Sunday Mirror*: “Emily puts on a Devil of a Show,” November 25, 2005, page 46.

“The movie is light on special effects and heavy on scenes that blur—but do not erase—the lines between faith and science, the natural and the supernatural. *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* is not a film for moviegoers who avoid the sound of creaky wooden floor planks, the scratch of fingernails on plaster walls, the howling of hellish voices in ancient tongues or the crunch of insects between human teeth. Is this insanity or spiritual warfare?”—*Daily Breeze*: “*Emily Rose* meant to be more than scary film,” September 2005, page B2.

“Spooky and serious, this theological tinger ‘inspired by real events’ gives ammunition to atheist and believer alike.... Told using flashbacks, Emily's saga has little to do with organized religion and everything to do with blunting absolutes in order to secure a foothold for spirituality. As an agnostic ritual, it stakes out a middle ground between belief and doubt; as a movie, it's less successful.”—*Cinema Syndicate*, September 2005.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Laura Linney (Erin Bruner); Tom Wilkinson (Father Moore); Campbell Scott (Ethan Thomas); Jennifer Carpenter (Emily Rose); Colm Feore (Karl Gunderson); Joshua Close (Jason); Kenneth Welsh (Dr. Mueller); Duncan Fraser (Dr. Cartwright); JR Bourne (Ray); Mary Beth Hurt (Judge Brewster); Henry Czerny (Dr. Briggs); Shohreh Aghdashloo (Dr. Adani). Steve Archer (Guy in Bar).

CREW: Screen Gems presents a Lakeshore Entertainment and Firm Films film, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. Casting: Nancy Naylor Battino. Production Designer: David Brisbin. Costume Designer: Tish Monaghan. Special Effects: Zircon Enterprises, Captive Audience Productions, Technical Digital Intermediate. Music: Christopher Young. Director of Photography: Tom Stern. Film Editor: Jeff Betancourt. Producers: Paul Harris Boardman, Beau Flynn, Gary Lucchesi, Tom Rosenberg, Tripp Vinson. Executive Producers: Andre Lamal, David McIlvain, Terry McKay, Julie Yorn. Written by: Paul Harris Boardman and Scott Derrickson. Directed by: Scott Derrickson. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 119 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A Catholic priest, Father Moore (Wilkinson), is arrested following the death of a young woman in his care, Emily Rose (Carpenter). A high-powered lawyer looking to advance in her firm, Erin Bruner (Linney), is tasked with defending the priest on the charge of “negligent homicide.” Father

Moore, however, claims that Emily Rose was actually demonically possessed at the time of her death and that he was attempting to exorcise her. The high-profile case goes to court, pitting Erin against Catholic prosecutor and family man Ethan Thomas (Scott). As Erin meets with Father Moore and considers the evidence, she begins to believe that Emily may have been possessed, even though Thomas presents the case that Emily actually suffered from a psychiatric condition called “*psychotic epileptic disorder*.” Soon, strange events spiral around the trial, including the death of a witness who could have helped confirm Father Moore’s defense.

COMMENTARY: *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* is one of the finest and most unique horror films to come out of Hollywood since 1999, when *The Blair Witch Project* broke the mold of audience expectations both in technique and subject matter and went on to become a blockbuster. *Emily Rose*’s screenplay would—at first glance—appear to be littered with land mines, dependent on two genres that can easily become clichéd, the first horror, the second, the courtroom drama. Amazingly, the director and co-writer, Scott Derrickson, avoids clichés and melodrama for the most part, and instead forges a film of undeniable power, remarkable sensitivity, and quite a bit of creepiness.

Much of the film involves a priest, Father Moore, on trial for negligent homicide during Emily’s exorcism, so much the story of Emily’s life is told in flashbacks. Flashback can be tricky, unless they are somehow utilized used to fracture a narrative in interesting ways (think *Pulp Fiction*; or *John Carpenter’s Ghosts of Mars*), but the flashbacks work well in this film, in part because director Derrickson has—in many cases—given audiences two versions of the same events. In other words, one flashback encourages the “demonic possession” angle of the story; the next encourages the idea that Emily was an epileptic, given to body-contorting spasms, and possibly psychotic. Similarly, the priest who failed to exorcise her, played by the brilliant Tom Wilkinson, believes that wounds on her hand are stigmata, signs of God’s handiwork. The audience sees that explanation in one flashback. Yet in another, gets a contrary view: that Emily intentionally gouged her hands on a barbed wire fence. This is precisely the kind of ambiguity, dueling world-perspectives, that would be nice to see in other religious-based horrors of the 2000s, such as 2007’s *The Reaping*.



Is she sick or possessed? Jennifer Carpenter is Emily in *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005).

In films of this type, there should be acknowledgment that our world can't be reduced easily to one answer or another, the existence of spiritual forces, or the lack of them. Here, the film's dueling framework involves the medical or psychiatric realm vs. supernatural/religious explanations, and the parameters of this debate hold the film in good standing throughout. By suggesting and revealing alternatives, Derrickson gives the horror genre its very own latter day *Rashomon* (1950), and audiences get to choose what they prefer to believe.



A lawyer, Erin Bruner (Laurey Linney), and priest, Father Moore (Tom Wilkinson), ponder metaphysics in *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005).

This “choosing” is an important aspect of the film’s climax. Laura Linney plays Erin Bruner, the lawyer defending Father Moore against charges, and her closing statement is a metaphor for the film itself. She doesn’t ask the jury to believe the incredible story of possession (and in a sense, we’re all the jury, those who watch this movie) but instead, merely entertain the idea that there are some things in this world which medicine can’t yet diagnose. And more to the point, she reminds the jury (and again, the audience) that Father Moore and Emily Rose certainly believed in the phenomena of demonic possession. Because of this world view, they were susceptible to seeing things they believed. They had what one might call bias confirmation, perhaps. This material is brilliantly vetted, and Laura Linney is powerful in the role of an open-minded agnostic.



Her story is shrouded in mist and fog. Jennifer Carpenter in *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005).

Another key strength of the film is Jennifer Carpenter's performance as Emily. This is a performer who can appear completely normal one moment, then stark raving insane the next; and sometimes the shifts are literally that fast. Her characterization and physicality in this role are quite believable; and she boasts vulnerability, an important characteristic for a possessed "hyper-sensitive" that engenders sympathy. Carpenter is aided by outstanding but subdued special effects. When Emily begins to see demons, the effects are terrifying, but the film is always quick to clarify that we are being told what Emily *believed* she saw; not that which actually existed. And the exorcism itself—unlike perhaps the greatest horror film ever made—*The Exorcist*—is again, open to interpretation. Emily Rose's head doesn't spin around, but her neck does contort, her joints freeze, and her irises go black. Interestingly, every one of these "manifestations" of possession is easily explained by medical science, again providing audiences two distinct perspectives on what happened.

The film is oddly timely in terms of 2000s issues. The role of religious belief and its relationship to the law and medical science was not a small matter when the film was released in September of 2005. Earlier that year, for example, Florida governor Jeb Bush, the Republican caucus in Congress, and President George W. Bush intervened in the Terri Schiavo case, to keep a patient in a persistent vegetative state alive. They passed Terri's Law to do so, overriding the wishes of Terri's guardian and husband, Michael Schiavo. Terri's parents believed that Terri had been a devout Roman Catholic and would not have approved of euthanasia or a right-to-die. The case became a national spectacle, as Republican Senator Bill Frist, who had never seen Terri Schiavo in person, took to the Senate and diagnosed her condition, via videotape, suggesting (erroneously) that Schiavo was responsive to external stimuli. Here, as in the film, religion, medicine and the law clashed over ethics and even the facts of a patient's condition, and some advocates wanted to consider her religious beliefs, which she could neither confirm or deny, as the basis for deciding her life or death. Although certainly, the film was not a response to the Terri Schiavo case (it would have been in production at the time), there seems to have been something in the water at this point in the national dialogue. Likely, it was the leadership of George W. Bush, who explained, from his earliest primary debates, that he was a born-again Christian who followed what he believed were the teachings of Jesus Christ, and those teachings would inform his decisions as President, including the ban on stem cell research in 2001. The rise of "faith-based" leadership and initiatives in the 2000s led to government interference in the personal matters of the Schiavo family, which had already been decided in the guardian's favor during earlier court hearings.

Another issue that the film tackles is the use of psychiatric drugs. In 2005, the year of *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, on July 25, Scientologist and movie star Tom Cruise appeared on NBC's *Today Show* and was interviewed by Matt Lauer about his disapproval of anti-depressants and his belief that psychiatry was a pseudo-science. He claimed that there was no such thing as a chemical imbalance in the human body and that he had studied the history of psychiatry. In the movie, psychiatry and drugs are a key issue, too. A fictional drug called "Gambutrol" was prescribed to Emily by her psychiatrist to help control her schizophrenia, paranoia and psychotic epileptic disorder. The reason that Father Moore's exorcism failed, according to the script, was that prescription. Gambutrol locked her in the possessed state and made her too weak to fight it. So, the film does feature a message that could reasonably be described as "anti-psychiatry," or at least anti-prescription drug.

By 2013, *JAMA Internal Medicine* had published a report showing that one in six U.S. adults reported taking psychiatric drugs in 2013. These included anti-depressants, anxiolytics, sedatives, and—related to the film—anti-psychotics. This figure was considered staggering and in the 2000s, horror films such as *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, *Freddy vs. Jason* and *The Invasion* dealt with the issue that 16.7 million of the 242 million adults in the country were getting prescriptions for psychiatric drugs.¹⁵ This study was co-written by a doctor named Moore, which was the same name, coincidentally, as the priest in *Emily Rose*.

If *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* falters anywhere, it is in trying to keep the "scares" going. When the film opens, Emily Rose is already dead, the exorcism having failed. The film attempts to generate suspense and terror in the present during the trial by having Linney's character, Erin, experience her own brush with evil. She hears strange noises in her apartment late at night. A witness in the trial who

would have supported Emily's case dies in a freak accident. And so on. This is an unnecessary and contradictory part of the film. Precious screen time could have been better spent on flashbacks of Emily's home life; her first days away at college, the relationship with her first boyfriend, Jason, etc. All these aspects are important indicators of how either mental illness or possession developed. Had this film aspired to be truly great art, like *The Exorcist*, *The Blair Witch Project* or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* it would have made the lawyers less-important characters and instead simply focused on their arguments and flashbacks that support them.

A cool, detached, intellectual approach, carefully revealing each side of the medicine/supernatural debate, would have made for an even more thoughtful film, and one infinitely more frightening on a cerebral level. Yet perhaps that is too much to expect out of Hollywood horror of the 2000s, which insists on visceral terror like the cat scare (a cat jumps at an unwitting victim), CGI special effects, and other predictabilities. At least the film doesn't go for an overtly happy and unbelievable ending. The court decides that the priest is guilty of negligent homicide but doesn't punish him in a way commensurate with that crime, given the odd circumstances of Emily's last days.

Thus, within the boundaries the Hollywood context has set for it, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* is a minor miracle, a film that intelligently examines the debate about the role of medicine and religion in our culture, just as end of life/abortion/intelligent design fights were brewing everywhere from Florida to the Supreme Court confirmation hearings of John Roberts. "Scary" is a subjective thing, but the film is very frightening, and at times, subtly so.

The Fog *

Critical Reception

"The new version, pushed further up the coast to Oregon, dumps the campfire ghost story angle and, instead, inserts periodic heavy-handed flashbacks to the events merely hinted at in the original: the fate of a leper colony ship, loaded with gold, and deliberately sunk by the founders of the coastal burg, Antonio Bay."—Dan Craft, *Pantagraph*: "Vision lost in *The Fog*; 2005 remake nothing more than 1980's evil twin." October 20, 2005, page D3.

"...it never quite reaches the unsettling level that makes for heart-pounding suspense. In part, that's because the ghost ship and flashbacks to the founder's journey have already given away what is really in the fog well before the whole story is explained. But the picture is well enough crafted that it doesn't fall apart, and the final scenes are effective. Also, it's nice to see the continuation of the trend of ghost stories aimed at the teen or twentysomething horror audience rather than the slasher films that have run their course."—Kent L. Wolgamott, *Lincoln Journal Star*, October 14, 2005, page 5.

"The new re-make, unfortunately, is just one 'mist' opportunity."—*The Morning Star*: "*Fog* tests the limits of silliness," October 23, 2005, page C3.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Tom Welling (Nick Castle); Maggie Grace (Elizabeth Williams); Selma Blair (Stevie Wayne); DeRay Davis (Spoonster); Kenneth Welsh (Tom Malone); Adrian Hough (Father Malone); Sara Botsford (Kathy Williams); Cole Heppell (Andy Wayne); Mary Black (Aunt Connie); Jonathon Young (Dan the Weatherman); R. Nelson Brown (Machen); Christian Bocher (Patrick Malone); Douglas Arthurs (David Williams); Yves Cameron (Richard Wayne); Charles Andre (Norman Castle); Rade Serbedzija (Blake).

CREW: Revolution Studios, Debra Hill Productions and Columbia Pictures, in association with David Foster Productions presents *The Fog*. Casting: Cathy Sandrich Gelfond, Amanda Mackey. Production Designers: Michael Diner, Graeme Murray. Costume Designer: Monique Prudhomme. Special Effects: Hydraulx, Carck Creative, Lindala Schminken FX. Music: Graeme Revell. Director of Photography: Nathan Hope. Film Editing: Dennis Virkler. Producers: John Carpenter, Grace Gilroy, Debra Hill. Executive Producers: Derek Dauchy, Todd Garner, Dan Kolsrød. Based on the motion picture *The Fog* by: John Carpenter and Debra Hill. Written by: Cooper Layne. Directed by: Rupert Wainwright. M.P.A.A Rating: PG-13. Running time: 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Antonio Bay, a town in Oregon, was re-born as a wealthy community in 1871 after years of poverty. The town's four founding fathers—Wayne, Castle, Malone and Williams—secretly built the community by welching on a contract with a rich leper named Blake. Blake wanted to build a colony nearby and was on his way to doing so, when the founding fathers attacked and burned his clipper, the *Elizabeth Dane*, at sea. They then stole his fortune in gold and built the town. Now, 130-something years later, Blake and his men are ghosts, returning for vengeance and to claim something else that was stolen from them. In 2005, a fisherman named Nick Castle (Welling), his sometimes girlfriend Elizabeth Williams (Grace), radio DJ Stevie Wayne (Selma Blair) and her son, Andy, get caught up in Blake's vengeance as a murderous fog rolls in.

COMMENTARY: Rupert Wainwright's remake of John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980), is an utterly craftless horror film, and one so lazy, so poorly constructed that it can't even be bothered to develop the most rudimentary idea, or even present an interesting character and logical storyline. The overriding atmosphere of the film is literally one of "I can't be bothered to scare you."

A good horror movie requires patience and skill to build an ominous and effective tone. Viewers need a sense of where they are, and a "vibe" of the setting where the film is set. In the original Carpenter movie, for instance, the audience sees Stevie Wayne taking a long and perilous walk down a staircase on a vast, craggy mountainside overlooking a raging sea. She is headed towards her lighthouse radio station, and the wind blows against her with a vengeance. In long shot, we see her isolated and alone on this rocky coast, far from help. This location will be of critical importance in the finale, when Blake's avengers attack. As viewers, we know where Stevie is, how small she is on that vast, lonely landscape, and most importantly, that help cannot reach her. We know this because Carpenter has taken the time to show it to us, and to do so effectively. It isn't an image that easily leaves the mind.



Father Malone (Adrian Hough) knows a secret in *The Fog* (2005).

In the remake, the film can't be bothered to build a mood, and again and again, actually races past the suspense, past the atmospheric, to get to not-so-good CGI effects. We get, perhaps, two establishing shots of the lighthouse. We never see the new Stevie in a vast long shot, or even climbing the stairs to the lighthouse tower *inside*. Her car pulls up and then we're in the studio of the light house. Consequently, there's no sense of this place, where it is, or why it is important.

Had this occurred only once, one could dismiss the lack of mood, of location, as an oversight. But the director shows time and time again that he has no energy or will to dramatize for viewers a "place" we can believe in, which is important, since the film is about a community, Antonio Bay. For instance, the same lack of detail and therefore suspense occurs when Nick and Elizabeth head out on the open sea in a small boat when they hear that his vessel, the *Sea Grass*, is missing. Does it take them some time to find the missing vessel (as it did in the original?)

Nope.



Racing to safety. From right to left, Nick Castle (Tom Welling), Elizabeth Williams (Maggie Grace) and Andy (Cole Heppell) attempt to escape from ghosts in the remake of *The Fog* (2005).

They literally find it in one shot. They go out to the big, wide sea and immediately locate the missing vessel. Again, the opportunity for suspense has been utterly squandered. Instead, we race from point-to-point as if this is the CliffsNotes version of *The Fog*, sans mood, sans scares. The sea itself was almost a character in the original film. It was the place that spawned the ghosts, of course, but it was also a realm of mystery. In Carpenter's version, Nick told Elizabeth (played by Jamie Lee Curtis) a story he had heard recounted as a boy, about another ghost ship. Unease in the original arose in no small part because the sea is a place where *we're not at home*; a mysterious place. This film hasn't thought about the ocean at all, and what it means to us, or how we—as viewers—react to it.

What scares us about the ocean?

This movie has no idea. Some long shots, some moody sequences of searching for the Sea Grass might have brought us into the characters' situation. We might have had to reckon with the vastness of the ocean, the empty, isolating nature of it. We could have had time to grow scared, to reflect on a mystery. But again, this movie can't be bothered.

Finally, the unveiling of the statue of the Founding Fathers at the Antonio Bay City Hall is another scene that exists for no good reason. There are maybe four or five people at the unveiling. Could the film not afford extras? Could the film not have afforded a few moments of ironic dialogue (like the original featured) where the point is established that Antonio Bay was built on *theft and murder*? Nope. There's no sense of a real community in this film. There's the mayor, the mother, the priest, the fisherman, the DJ, her kid, and a token African American.

The entire film is like that. It never establishes an interior reality. There is no verisimilitude. Which brings the discussion inevitably, to the abundant gaps in situational logic here. On its return to Antonio Bay for revenge, the fog first attacks the 30-foot trawler, the aforementioned *Sea Grass*. The fog infiltrates the boat via a lousy CG shot and destroys the generators and all nautical equipment aboard. The fog then murders two party girls on board, and Nick's cousin, leaving Spooner (Davis) alive. When last the audience encounters Spooner, three corpses are spread out at his feet, he sees something off-screen and screams in terror. We assume he's going to die but we don't get to see it because, after all, this is a PG-13 movie. Yet, later Nick finds Spooner alive and well (if chilly) in the ship's cooler. Okay, how did Spooner—on the deck with corpses at his feet—escape the minions of Blake? How'd he get below deck? We already saw the fog infiltrate every aspect of the vessel, so much so that it knocked out the instrumentation and power generator. But it couldn't go into the cooler? Why? This gap in logic goes totally unexplained.

But this oversight is nothing compared to what happens next. Spooner is returned to shore and questioned by the police. They think he's a murderer, but he counters that there's *something in the fog*, something evil. Nick believes him without question. I can believe that, because Nick is Spooner's buddy and we're always inclined to believe our buddies, right? *Fine*. But Elizabeth shows disdain and skepticism over Spooner's claim that "*there is something in the fog*." Apparently, the movie has forgotten at this point two very important things about Elizabeth's character. First, she has been having recurring nightmares about being burned alive in a fire. Secondly, she researched a symbol from the *Elizabeth Dane* on the Internet at Nick's house, and when she did, she saw *ghostly wet footprints walk across the ceiling*. They led her out to the fog-encrusted shoreline, where the Fog repeatedly *whispered her name*, "Elizabeth." So, she readily admits to an irrational experience of her own (vivid recurring nightmares) and she's had a first-person encounter with the mysterious fog, to boot! You'd think all this might ring a bell when Spooner mentions the fog, not leave her at all skeptical. But the movie isn't smart enough to remember what happened a few scenes earlier, so instead, Elizabeth doesn't believe Spooner.

More gaps in situational logic abound. Stevie Wayne drives into the fog. It comes in through her car's front vents, and the car breaks down on a road. A truck then hits her car head on. She survives the impact, but the car is thrown down a rocky embankment into the swirling sea. She awakens underwater, tries to flee the sinking vehicle, and is grabbed by a ghostly hand. She escapes, swims to the surface, and that's the last we see of her for a while. Then, five minutes later, she shows up at the Antonio Bay Town Hall. So, she swam ashore, climbed the embankment, traveled the highway (without a car) and got to the center of the community in time for the climax.

A few minutes later, Nick is in his pick-up truck with Elizabeth and young Andy, and the fog surrounds them too. Only this time, *it doesn't get in the car through the vents*. Why? This is exactly the kind of thing filmmakers should never do in a horror movie: *break the rules*

Accordingly, this is a movie tailor-made for people with short-term memory, or limited attention span.

The film's opening flashback is even more confusing. The film depicts the four founding fathers of Antonio Bay sail away from the burning *Elizabeth Dane* in their rowboat, clutching their ill-gotten treasure. Then a hand reaches up from underwater and grabs one of them, pulling them into the murky depths. That's where the flashback ends. In the present, however, not a single character ever reports that one of the founding fathers was killed on this expedition.

What happened to the guy who got pulled down into the sea? Was he rescued? Was he killed? Why is there no mention of this incident? Again, the script can't even be bothered to connect the beginning of the film to the finale.

And then there's the finale. Ostensibly, Blake and his ghostly crew have returned to kill the descendants of the four founding fathers and "reclaim" something that they believe is rightfully theirs. Okay, well those descendants include Mrs. Williams, Elizabeth, Father Malone, the Mayor, Stevie Wayne, Andy Wayne and Nick Castle. Yet the ghosts don't attack and kill Stevie, Andy or Nick. Why? Instead, they torture and murder the Mayor (Welsh). What did the Mayor do *specifically* to deserve this manner of gruesome death?

More importantly, what did Andy, Stevie and Nick *not* do to deserve so merciless and individual a demise? The movie never tells the audience. Elizabeth and Nick witness the Mayor being attacked in the Antonio Bay graveyard. He is handed a contract by the ghostly Blake, who looks about as scary the Cryptkeeper on *Tales from the Crypt*, and when he touches it, he burns up in flames. Elizabeth and Nick, for some reason, believe that this is the end of the incident, and walk away. A moment later, Elizabeth returns, feeling drawn to Blake. She goes to him, he kisses her, and *she turns into the ghost of his wife*. Then they all disappear together, thus explaining her nightmares. Nick returns just in time to see Blake and Elizabeth vanish together.

The problems with this sequence are almost too numerous to parse. Is the audience to believe that Elizabeth is a reincarnation of Blake's wife? That's fine, but she is still made of *flesh and blood*, isn't she? She still exists as the biological daughter of Mrs. Williams, right? She possesses a genetic structure, doesn't she? She is a creature of biological matter. So, how does she transform into a ghost all of a sudden, without having to die first? Could someone explain that? Or, alternately, was she a ghost all along? But again, Mrs. Williams *gave birth to her*, right?

Again, the movie just can't be troubled to be coherent.

Perhaps the biggest problem here involves the lazy staging. Nick turns away and leaves Elizabeth behind *long enough for her to walk back to the graveyard, approach Blake, kiss him, and turn into a ghost*, before he notices she is gone?

Not a very observant or engaged boyfriend, is he?

The original, and far superior, version of *The Fog* laid down some essential ground rules for Blake's ghosts. They grew stronger as the hundredth anniversary of the *Elizabeth Dane's* sinking approached. But even as they did, they could only come out during the "witching hour" between midnight and 1:00 a.m. Also, they were only allowed to claim six lives—the lives of the six conspirators who sank the *Elizabeth Dane*. Finally, in the original *Fog* audiences knew exactly when characters would be in danger. If they stepped into the fog during the witching hour, and six people hadn't died yet, they were imperiled.

In the new *The Fog*, there are no such ground rules. There is no attempt at consistency. People step in and out of the fog, which comes and goes as it pleases, and sometimes survive, sometimes die. We don't know how many victims the ghostly fog can claim, or why it chooses people in the first place. There isn't even a consistent mode of killing. One kindly old lady gets burned to a crisp after the fog comes up her through her kitchen sink drain, yet the party-girls on the *Sea Grass* are just drowned.

By messing with the thoughtful structure of the original film, the makers of this version have

forgotten why their movie is even titled *The Fog* in the first place. In the original, an unearthly fog rolled into Antonio Bay the night of the sinking, and the conspirators lit a fire. Blake and his people mistook the light of the campfire for the signal of a lighthouse and steered their ship through the heavy fog and onto the breakers, where it sunk. *That is why the "fog" is Blake's medium of revenge.* It killed his people and now he summons it to befuddle and kill the descendants of the conspirators. In the new version of *The Fog*, the founding fathers burn the ship! There is no fog! The original incident shown in flashback here has nothing whatsoever to do with the fog, so the reason that Blake and his people return in the fog has no connection to the original crime.

Folks, this is what happens when people remake movies willy-nilly. They forget why the original versions worked and—in the rush to present their “own vision”—forge only disaster.

Another example of this disregard for the original: the return of the spirits isn't even connected to the 100th anniversary of the founding of Antonio Bay. *So why do the ghosts pick this moment to return to wreak vengeance?* Is it because the *Sea Grass's* anchor dislodged a bag of treasure at the bottom of the sea? Well, if so, it certainly is convenient how that happened just as Elizabeth is at the right age to be Blake's ghostly wife again.

Do yourself a favor, let this version of *The Fog* sink into the mists of history without a further look. Go back and watch the classic original instead. Don't give this cynical, lazily constructed enterprise a dollar of your hard-earned cash or a minute of your precious time. The filmmakers created this mess in a haze of confusion, and never came out of that fog to see if what they were up to makes sense.

Hard Candy * * * *

Critical Reception

"Because *Hard Candy* skirts the edge of the art house, we instinctively suspect self-important philosophical debates are coming up, along with head games and people bound to chairs in nice apartments. And there is a strength in its arguments: When the guy ends up tied to the chair, when she turns the tables and proves to be equally repellent, you ask, Is she a monster herself or a product of adult monsters?"—Christopher Borrelli, *Knight-Ridder Tribune Business News*: "Drama gets bloody as it toys with expectations,"—May 19, 2006.

"*Hard Candy* ultimately beats with the heart of a stagier, more complicated psychological revenge picture along the lines of Roman Polanski's *Death and the Maiden*. And while the film's blunter, more thriller-ish and sadistic second half is less unnerving than its bloodless first, it still works as a smarter than usual cat-and-mouse death match."—Mike Russell, *The Oregonian*, April 28, 2006.

"I can't believe how much of this film was shot in medium close-up or close-up. It produced a nervy atmosphere that when combined with the edgy narrative content, can make you feel unsettled and hostile. Patrick Wilson and Ellen Page both went all-in and all-out with their totally committed performances."—Nick Clement, *Back to the Movies*, 2017, last retrieved on September 3, 2020.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Patrick Wilson (Jeff Kohlver); Ellen Page (Hayley Stark); Sandra Oh (Judy Tokuda); Jennifer Holmes (Janelle); Gilbert John (Clerk).

CREW: Lions Gate Films, and Vulcan Productions in association with Launchpad Productions, presents *Hard Candy*. Casting: Valerie McCaffrey. Costume Designer: Jennifer Johnson. Production Designer: Jeremy Reed. Music: Harry Escott, Molly Nyman. Director of Photography: Jo Willems. Film Editor: Art Jones. Producers: Michael Caldwell, David Higgins, Richard Hutton. Executive Producers: Jody Patton, Paul g. Allen, Roanne Korenberg. Written by: Brian Nelson. Directed by: David Slade. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A middle-aged photographer, Jeff (Wilson), meets with a 14-year-old girl, Hayley (Page), for coffee, and then brings her back to his home, where he has a studio and the walls are decorated with his pictures. He offers her a drink, but soon the tables are turned as he is rendered unconscious. When he awakes, Jeff is restrained, and Hayley prepares to castrate him. She accuses him of being a pedophile and ruining the lives of young women. Jeff continues to resist a confession, even as Hayley prepares ice, slaps on latex gloves, and gets ready to go to work on the castration surgery. Jeff attempts to reason with Hayley, but she is prepared for his evasions and gaslighting.

COMMENTARY: *Hard Candy* is one of the most stunning, powerful torture porn movies of the decade, a two-person story that contends with difficult concepts, including predation, pedophilia and gaslighting to name a few. The movie plays with audience expectations about who is the victim and who is the predator in its set-up, but also clearly fits the mold of the Men Behaving Badly sub-genre prevalent in the decade (and seen in such films as *What Lies Beneath*, *Gothika*, *Deadgirl*, and *Shutter*). *Hard Candy* has often been compared and contrasted with the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale, because of Hayley's red hoodie, but mostly as an inversion of the tale. Here, as many critics pointed out, the wolf is the victim, and Little Red Riding Hood is the aggressor.

This description, however, doesn't do justice to the film's intellectual brilliance, or sense of gamesmanship. In a decade of remakes that couldn't be bothered to be as intelligent or nuanced as their

source material was, *Hard Candy* stands out as an original tale of unfailing complexity. The film asks audiences to reckon with multiple ideas at the same time and resolves very few of those competing thoughts. Jeff, of course, is a predator and a liar. He deserves to be punished for breaking the law, and ruining lives. He is a pedophile, and a self-justifying, unrepentant one. Law enforcement and the legal system apparently have no interest in stopping him or punishing him for his behaviors. Hayley is a kid, by contrast, just a child. Yet she tortures Jeff in a most sadistic way before leading him to his demise.

Is this justice? Though Jeff is the scum of the Earth, is this punishment moral? And, is Kayley a sociopath for bringing it about, even though she is on the side of justice? Furthermore, if she is not a sociopath, just an avenging angel of sorts, what about Jeff's argument to her that the things we do wrong haunt us? Will she be haunted by her actions, vis-à-vis, Jeff? Or are her actions so righteous that she'll be able to sleep just fine, afterwards, thank you very much.

What this comes down to, perhaps, is the law. In a civilized society, we don't torture and murder people who have not been found guilty of crimes in a court of law. And yet it what if the system is broken, and not catching criminals? Is it appropriate to go after those who have not been found guilty as a vigilante (like, say, Batman in *The Dark Knight* [2008])? Doesn't our country champion both law and order, and vigilantism, like this? How can America support both ideals?

These are actually some of the most important debates in American society in the post-9/11 age. Does the savage crime enacted on September 11, 2001, justify the torture of prisoners? Holding combatants without charges, in perpetuity? Pre-emptively attacking another country that could one day be a threat to us? Brushing aside the Geneva Conventions as inconvenient and quaint?

And if America does all those things, what is the cost to America's soul? Is the country going to be haunted, forever, by the things it did wrong to pursue justice in the absence of justice? Or does America sleep peacefully at night, knowing it has meted global retribution for the evil of 9/11?

Again, not small questions.

Jeff in the film is a bad, bad man. Does that badness justify the torture? People will no doubt argue different sides. This author comes down to the following truths. Jeff is a monster who doesn't take responsibility for his actions, and for his behaviors. He lies, abuses his power and privilege in society to bed women, and to bed underage women. It is difficult to have sympathy for him as a victim, given all this. Especially since the castration is all a ruse designed to spur a confession. When Jeff (mistakenly) believes his power and privilege is reasserted, he immediately goes after Hayley, again demonstrating his true colors. Given his behavior after the mock-castration, which the audience witnesses (as opposed to testimony about his behavior from Hayley), one can deduce that Hayley acts righteously.

However, this author is nonetheless concerned for Hayley, and the act of taking this on herself. Not only does she put herself in terrible physical jeopardy, she puts herself in the place to be haunted by her actions. What if she does this again, and kills someone who is actually innocent? What then? The point perhaps, is not whether Jeff is good or bad, but whether, for Hayley, if she is playing a game that will ultimately harm her in some irreparable way.

Hard Candy is clever because both of the characters in this drama are smart, perhaps even fiendishly smart. The fact that people bear so much sympathy for Jeff, in some circles, suggests the very privilege and entitlement that allows him to go unpunished. It is difficult for many, to believe a young woman when she testifies against an established man in a position of power. The man is given, largely, every benefit of the doubt, while the young woman is given little leeway. As Hayley notes "*It's so easy to blame a kid.*"

What's so terrifying about Jeff is that he has learned how to look like a sheep, when he is actually the Big Bad Wolf. He claims he is a respectable artist and shoots important "*environmental*" photography, as if believing that taking care of the environment absolves him of guilt in terms of his sexual predation. Again, it is impossible not to consider this film's point in light of #MeToo. No doubt that Harvey Weinstein and other alleged sex offenders donated to worthwhile charities, or political candidates who supported positive social changes and agendas. Does that give them a pass?

No.

Believing in the environment, equal rights for women, social justice, and the like mean nothing if

one's personal behavior is abusive, and, actually, illegal. There are predators who hide behind a stance of being an ally, but are still, in the final analysis, predators

Jeff is also depicted as a hypocrite. He is stunned to learn that Kayley has been researching and learning about his behavior. "*You've been stalking me?*" He asks with offended disbelief, and self-righteous indignation. Yet he stalks his victim on the Internet, lures them to his house, and then presses his advantage. He attempts to gaslight Kayley by telling her "*I'm not the monster you think I am.*" But as his stash of kiddie porn proves, he abundantly is.

An argument could be made that all horror films are, in the final analysis, meditations on violence and the use of violence. Hayley threatens violence and appears to use violence (in the false castration), to get to the truth about Jeff. In the end, however, she gives him a choice. He can either be revealed for what he is (a pedophile and predator), or he can take his own life. She is still playing judge, jury and executioner, however, despite his illusion of choice in the matter. This is why there is substance to the argument that as some point she will be haunted by her own behavior.

It is clear that there are many things wrong with Jeff. He is a liar, a manipulator, a predator, and a sexual deviant. But *Hard Candy* also leaves itself open to two possible readings for the audience to consider. The first is that Jeff's day is over, and that the victims of his crimes, and those who know about them, are finally unwilling to accept the status quo, and will do anything to change it. If this reading is right, *Hard Candy* is about telling those who benefit from entitlement and privilege that they are on notice that their illegal and anti-social behavior will no longer be tolerated, nor conducted under cover of darkness and silence. It's the Day of the Victims!

The second reading of the film is that one predator, Jeff, is taken down by another, smarter, predator, Hayley. If this second reading is correct, then Hayley is, ultimately, just as frightening and bad as Jeff is. This is a fascinating idea that reminds one of George Romero's story, *Anubis*, which was the source of his living dead saga. That's the story with the book end, mirror-reflection scenes. *Anubis* opens with humans hunting and killing a solitary zombie. It ends with zombies hunting and killing a solitary human. The social hierarchy has changed, but the violence inherent in the idea of a social hierarchy has not changed. It has remained exactly the same, no matter who is on top, and who has fallen to the bottom of the food chain. *Hard Candy* may just suggest that the death of one predator, or one kind of predation, is not necessarily a social good if it is followed explicitly by the rise of another predator and another form of predation. If all that changes is simply the demographic of the person in power but not the behavior of that person then, as Romero has noted, what's it going to take to change?

Hard Candy provides no easy answers, and no solace in black and white definitions of right and wrong. The movie is sharp and will leave one disturbed at the inferences and ideas it presents. This lands the movie in the best tradition of the horror genre, because it asks the viewer to face the mirror, and look at who we are, as individuals and as a people. The movie accomplishes this feat, unironically, in the age when Americans had to ask themselves questions about good and evil in the War on Terror, and our role in supporting or rejecting it.

Do the ends justify the means? Does one bad act justify another bad act? Is a bad act in the name of righteousness the same as justice? Or is it vigilantism? *Hard Candy* takes this all on with a fearlessness, wit and insight that is, at times, breathtaking.

*Hellraiser: Deader (DTV) * **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kari Wuhrer (Amy Klein); Paul Rhys (Winter); Simon Kunz (Charles Richmond); Marc Warren (Joey); Georgina Rylance (Marla); Doug Bradley (Pinhead); Hugh Jorgin (Reporter); Linda Marlowe (Betty); Madaline Constantin (Anna); Ioana Abur (Katia); Costi Barbulescu (The Landlord).

CREW: Dimension Films, Stan Winston Productions, Miramax, in association with Neo Art & Logic and Castel Film Romania present *Hellraiser: Deader*. Casting: Carrie Hilton, Karen Meisels, Adrienne Stern. Music:

Henning Lohner. Special Effects: Gary J. Tunnicliffe, Jeff Yagher, Chad Goei, Jamison Scott Goei. Director of Photography: Vivi Dragan Vasile. Film Editing: Anthony Adler. Producer: David S Greathouse, Ron Schmidt, Stan Winston. Executive Producer: Nick Phillips. Written by: Neal Marshall Stevens, Tim Day. Directed by: Rick Bota. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Investigative reporter Amy Klein (Wuhrer) visits Bucharest, Romania, to investigate a cult of people called “Deaders.” The cult seems to have learned the secret of immortality, and of bringing the dead back to life. These secrets, however, are enmeshed with the dangerous Lament Configuration, and Pinhead (Bradley) himself.

COMMENTARY: Well, at least this direct-to-video *Hellraiser* sequel isn’t about a man who is already in Hell but doesn’t realize it yet, like the last two entries. Instead, this film, just like so many low-budget horror films of the 2000s, travels to Romania (where it is cheap to make a movie!) and tells a tale of a reporter hunting down the truth behind a mysterious videotape.

If that notion sounds familiar, just think of Naomi Watts and *The Ring* (2000), rather than Kari Wuhrer and *Deader*, a sequel which was made in 2002 but not released/distributed until 2005. It would be tempting, though not necessarily illustrative, to make note that this story-set-up is a common one of the 2000s by tying in an arbiter of “facts” to technology, video, that can’t necessarily be trusted. *Deader* feels more like it is glomming on to the latest trend then genuinely attempting to explore the changing face of media in the 21st century.

Like *Inferno* and *Hellseeker*, most of the horror sequences in this franchise film take the form of troubling hallucinations. Amy is tortured by black-and-white visions of abuse at the hands of her father, for instance. The film also includes interminable hallucinations of character going down subterranean tunnels, where the cult is housed. None of this is very persuasive or very scary, and the problem is that for long stretches of time, the movie is dull, lacking in both style and narrative interest.

That’s a sad state of affairs for this franchise, which boasts a legacy of over-the-top gore, strange narratives, and other quirky touches. At one point in the proceedings, Amy is advised to “*forget about the facts*” and “*just sit back and enjoy the ride*.” But *Deader* isn’t really a ride worth taking. The movie reveals that the cult leader is a Le Marchand, but even this twist feels like an element grafted on from another story, and so this movie doesn’t even feel like it is in the right franchise.

Deader is a good way of describing the status of the *Hellraiser* series at this juncture. Could it get any *deader*?

*Hellraiser: Hellworld (DTV) * * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Lance Henriksen (The Host); Kathryn Winnick (Chelsea); Christopher Jacot (Jake); Khary Payton (Derrick); Henry Cavill (Mike); Anna Tolputt (Allison); Doug Bradley (Pinhead); Stelian Urian (Adam).

CREW: Miramax, Dimension Films, in association with Neo Arts & Logic present *Hellraiser: Hellworld*. Casting: Karen Meisels, Adrienne Stern. Production Design: Christian Niculescu. Costume Design: Oana Paunescu. Music: Lars Anderson. Special Effects: Gary J. Tunnicliffe, Jeff Yagher, Jamison Scott Goei. Director of Photography: Gabriel Kosuth. Film Editing: Anthony Adler. Producer: Ron Schidt. Executive Producers: Vlad Paunescu, Nick Phillips. Story: Joel Soisson. Written by: Carl Dupre. Directed by: Rick Bota. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two years after the death of their friend, Adam (Urian), a group of friends led by Chelsea

(Winnick) attend a party at Adam's favorite video game: *Hellworld*. At this, the fifth annual celebration of the horror game, the friends are greeted by the Host (Henriksen), who collects items related to the macabre, and he takes them on a tour of "Leviathan House." At the party, all the guests are given masks and cell phones, to permit for anonymous debauchery, but soon Pinhead is at the party, and many deaths ensue.

COMMENTARY: Rick Bota's third direct-to-video *Hellraiser* sequel is a bit livelier than his two previous films, and that makes for a more entertaining, if not necessarily, better or deeper, viewing experience. If the lugubrious, tiresome *Deader* copied the format of 21st-century efforts like *The Ring*, *Hellworld* finds its inspiration in the video game milieu, another common thread of the decade seen in such efforts as *Resident Evil*, *Doom*, *Silent Hill*, and *Stay Alive*. The organizing principle here of a bunch of *Hellraiser* fans at a gaming convention allows for some good meta commentary on the horror franchise, as well as the role of gamers, video games, and horror, in the modern American pop culture. In particular, a franchise based in real fear and terror has become more "immersive"—but also less genuinely disturbing—by adding game "immersion" into the mix. The convention-goers adorn themselves in *Hellraiser* T-shirts and other gear, explicitly linking something "artistic" with merchandise and commerce. It's entertaining, even if not quite real. Anyone who has ever been to a horror convention knows that those who attend, while committed and in love with the genre, are not necessarily so ... hot as the fans depicted here.

Hellworld is also better cast than its two immediate predecessors. Lance Henriksen is a strong presence as the menacing "Host," and future mega-stars Henry Cavill and Katheryn Winnick lead the victim pool with distinction. There's also much more gore and sex on hand in this film, and that provides a nice respite from the "hallucination"-heavy aspects of the series highlighted in the three direct-to-video entries that precede this effort. Here, there's plenty of flesh on hand to ogle. Cavill's character gets fellatio performed on him at one point though doesn't seem to enjoy it. The sex act is staged so poorly that his lover's head is perched at his navel, instead of areas below. This is pointed out only because fleshly desires are what initiated the *Hellraiser* series of films back in 1987. There, Julia, remembering her tryst with Frank, and discontent with her current partner, brought him back from the dead by draining the blood of would-be lovers to revive him. Here, there is nothing so twisted going on: just a lot of hot young people having sex or being lured to gory demises as they are about to have sex. But again, at least it is bit livelier than the appropriately named "deader."

Hellworld also deserves credit not just for more sex and grotesque violence, but for playing more creatively with the rules of the franchise. Here, partygoers are attacked by Pinhead, even though they haven't opened the Lament Configuration. Long-time fans will complain, until they realize the truth: the partygoers are already "six feet under," and thus susceptible to the cenobite's dominion.

This isn't a good *Hellraiser* movie. There are only two, maybe three of those (the original, *Hellbound*, and maybe, generously, *Inferno*). However, *Hellworld* moves along a good clip, attempts to comment on horror/gamer fandom, highlights gratuitous sex and gore, and features capable performances.

By the mid-2000s, that was about the best a fan of this franchise could hope for.

LEGACY: Even lousier *Hellraiser* direct-to-video sequels continued in the 2010s with *Hellraiser: Revelations* (2011), and *Hellraiser: Judgment* (2018). Doug Bradley did not return to reprise the role of Pinhead in either entry, making *Hellworld* his last (as of this writing) performance as the imposing Cenobite.

High Tension * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"Horror fiends shouldn't get too worked up.... Because while *Tension* has plenty of good points (it earns its name, for one), it also has a couple of big problems. Not the least being that the film's central conceit simply does not work. Ultimately, the plot's got more holes than an ambushed Sonny Corleone."—Bob Longino, *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*: "Pieces just don't add up in French slasher flick," June 10, 2005, page E7.

"Alex and Marie are college friends who drive to Alex's family's house in the French countryside for a weekend of relaxation and study. The night they arrive, a mysterious man in mysterious overalls arrives in a mysterious truck and systematically slaughters Alex's family. Marie, however, manages to stay hidden during the carnage. When the mysterious man hogties Alex and drives away with her in the back of his mysterious truck, Marie pursues, determined to rescue her friend. Eventually Marie and the mysterious man face off against one another ... and then in a sucker punch, director Alexandre Aja reveals that there is no mysterious man. Marie is in love with Alex, and Marie *herself* is the kidnapper and executioner.

High Tension is undoubtedly one of the most divisive horror films to emerge from the era covered in this book, but there is one unifying factor amongst nearly all who have seen it: hating the ending. For 80 minutes viewers are led down a path of straightforward nihilistic, bloody violence (this is a film from the New French Extremity, after all), only to have their expectations and loyalty upended. Moreover, the reveal defies the laws of physics and time. For example, how could Marie (as the killer) drive the truck and chase after it in a different car? It's impossible, and ultimately audiences feel they've been cheated for the sake of an unexpected twist.

No matter what, the reality of the twist will strain credulity at times, but viewing *High Tension* through a queer lens gives it both a logic and thematic relevance: The entire narrative is a product of Marie's damaged mind, and she spends the length of the film waging a mental war with herself until one side emerges victorious. With (or without) this interpretation, *High Tension* comes dangerously close to propagating homophobia. Marie, the psychotic lesbian, destroys the family unit (the anti-gay crowd's greatest fear) and takes what she wants (an unwilling, heterosexual Alex). But more importantly, the film is also a peek at how *internalized* homophobia can destroy oneself and everything one holds dear. Marie's mental war is the result of self-loathing; She finds her sexuality repulsive and creates a cypher to act out her desires—which she views as vile—and spends the length of the movie literally battling her nature and urges. Rather than equating homosexuality with baseness and psychosis, *High Tension* reveals the tragic fallout from hating oneself for being gay.

Any nuance or deeper meaning in *High Tension*, particularly in the ways it addresses (or radiates) homophobia, is likely completely unintentional. The film's twist feels as if it was added purely for shock value, but there's more to dig into if you look for it. And if you're just in the market for a raucous horror movie, there is still plenty to enjoy about this gruesome, finely crafted, flawed film. No matter what, there's plenty to argue about."—Stacie Ponder, horror scholar and blogger.

"Here's a twist that destroyed the film and left the audience fuming. With a quick edit, I can solve everything and make the awful ending go away. Early in the film, the charming protagonist is masturbating in her guest room, as charming protagonists apparently do in French horror films. She then goes downstairs to witness the horrors inflicted on her hosts, and the rest of the serial killer chase continues only to reveal that SHE is the killer and the hulking, drooling truck driver is only in her mind. Cue audience throwing popcorn (and pocketed tomatoes) at the screen. The ending defies logic, physics, and good taste. HOWEVER, if everything happens exactly as originally shot, BUT instead of revealing that loony Marie was the killer, the film divulges that EVERYTHING in the plot from the doorbell ringing on was Marie's sick masturbatory fantasy due to her unhealthy fixation on her female friend Alex, and THEN have her clean up (after all, a charming protagonist in a French horror film always cleans herself up), grab a knife, and begin her reign of terror for REAL, a lot of popcorn and tomatoes would have been spared. It still would be a sick film, but at least it would make sense."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Cécile de France (Marie); Maiwenn (Alex); Philippe Nahon (Le tueur); Franck Khalfoun (Jimmy); Andrei Finti (Père Alex); Oana Pellea (Mère Alex); Marco Claudiu Pascu (Tom); Jean-Claude de Goros (Captain); Bogdan Uritescu (Gendarme); Gabriel Spahiu (Homme voiture).

CREW: Alexandre Films, Europa Corp. and Lions Gate Films Home Entertainment presents *High Tension*. Casting: Florin Chevorchian. Production Designer: Renald Cotte-Verdy, Tony Egrye. Special Effects: AutreChose. Music: Francois Eudes. Director of Photography: Maxime Alexandre. Film Editing: Baxter, Al Rundle, Sophie Vermersch. Producers: Alexandre Arcady, Robert Benmussa. Executive Producer: Andrei Boncea. Director: Alexandre Aja. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young woman named Marie (De France) retires to the family farmhouse of a friend, Alex (Mai-wenn), to cram for finals. Once at the farmhouse, Marie meets Alex's family but broods about the fact that Alex recently slept with a womanizing boyfriend. At the end of a long day, Marie rests in the upstairs bedroom and—after inadvertently spying Alex naked in the shower—begins to masturbate. Simultaneously, a grotesque, dirty man drives up to the idyllic farmhouse in a filthy old truck. Very quickly, the man gains entrance to the house and violently murders Alex's family members. He decapitates Alex's dad, slits her mom's throat, and shoots her little brother in the back. Then the male killer abducts Alex herself. Marie has managed to stay hidden throughout the terrifying massacre, and steals away into the back of the truck, where she attempts to comfort Alex. But Marie is about to discover that the identity of the killer is closer to her than she could have imagined.

COMMENTARY: To fully understand the quality of *High Tension* (2005), it is necessary to write a little bit about the genre as a whole. Specifically, consider this relevant axiom: the shattering of movie decorum represents the highest aesthetic achievement of the horror movie format. Furthermore, said shattering of silver screen taboos must be internally consistent; it must be vetted through film grammar, and it must be intellectually honest. The impressive result when cinematic form transgresses right alongside cinematic content is something of a miraculous alchemy, an unequaled frisson. What you get, simply, is an audience held in breathless fear; an audience unnerved; an audience squeezed tight in the grip of a skilled director. Because if you can't count on a lifetime of established movie convention to protect you, you are—literally—at risk as you watch a horror film, and therefore wholly susceptible to shock, suspense and surprise. You are putty, readily molded and easily squeezed because you have lost the bearings of your previous movie-going experience.

Two examples to support this thesis. First, of course, is Alfred Hitchcock's classic *Psycho* (1960), which shattered expectations in a most singular fashion. *Psycho* left an earlier generation of movie audiences absolutely shaken by the wanton killing off of the lead character, the protagonist (Marion Crane) just part way through the film. Conditioned to expect the survival of the lead character (and a star to boot, in the form of Janet Leigh), the audience suddenly felt rudderless because their "heroine" was murdered in the shower. Suddenly, it seemed that nothing was off limits and audiences were authentically terrified because no one could count-on what was coming next. The ensuing terror resulted not only because of the exceptional technique of shock editing in the shower murder sequence but because the audience had invested Marion with all their trusts and hopes; they had powerfully identified with her. *When she was gone, nobody in the audience knew what to expect.* The Janet Leigh "trick" was, put simply, a brilliant and historic transgression of form that shattered all previous established criterion of movie decorum. After pulling this trick, Hitchcock could indeed, play the audience like a piano.

The second example is perhaps less well-revered, but no less worth championing: Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), a trail-blazing horror film which raised the bar in the horror genre by the none-too-simple act of denying the audience one important thing: *the critical act of learning.* Ponder this for a moment. Learning is an essential component in the understanding of a film's narrative, and an audience usually *learns* important facts from the story structure, or through expositional dialogue offered by the *dramatis personae*. The narrative of a typical horror film even provides important clues as protagonists expire (revealing a killer's attire or suggesting a motive). The act of learning *universally* continues as a film's plot marches forward through the comfortable, familiar three-act structure. To bring up *Psycho* again, Janet Leigh's character dies—yes—but along comes Martin Balsam's character Arbogast, who probed Norman Bates' story and continued to develop the points of the plot. When Arbogast was killed, a man named Loomis (Marion's lover) picked up the trail and the act of learning about the Bates mystery was transferred once more, to a new lead character. Janet Leigh was long gone, but the narrative developed and climaxed with reason, rationality and explanation.

By contrast, there is no learning whatsoever in Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which is why it remains such a potent horror film. Knowledge does *not* pass from one protagonist to the

and next, and none of the film's violent acts are explained, let alone rationalized. Pam, Kirk, Jerry, and Franklin—four of the five main characters—are murdered by Leatherface's chainsaw without even knowing who they are dealing with, actually. They are killed without learning—and without warning their friends of the danger—and so the audience does not learn anything either. Because there is no learning, the plot never advances—it stalls in murderous rage (like Leatherface's silver kitchen door slammed repeatedly in our faces)—and Sally is left in a state of siege and panic, right along with the viewing audience. As Wes Craven once said of Tobe Hooper in relation to the director's first film, Hooper “can convince you you're really at risk in a theater”; meaning that by shattering decorum (the three act structure), Hooper has made us in *Chainsaw* feel intensely vulnerable (and therefore susceptible to the film's horror). Playwright L.M. Kit Carson said it another way, but also well: “Hooper was a scare-director who was methodically unsafe, who the audience (you) finally just couldn't trust.” Few modern directors are able (or willing) to legitimately shatter decorum and transgress in a bold fashion that is both (a) internally consistent and (b) intellectually honest. Few directors are able to build on Hitchcock's success the way Hooper did. Few have pinpointed that “new way” to cross a line that has previously gone uncrossed. Off the top of my head, one can readily think of two horror films of recent vintage that have indeed made that very attempt—even if the results weren't always stellar. Those films are *Wolf Creek* and—no surprise here—*High Tension*. Both of these admirable films, whatever their specific and particular drawbacks, at least make the noble attempt to dramatize a horror story in a new and transgressive fashion.

Now, onto the specifics of *High Tension*. It is a brutal, pacey and effectively directed horror movie. It looks terrific, it involves audiences in the protagonist's plight, and it makes one feel entirely uneasy throughout the first hour (or about 68 minutes). However, a quality concern with *High Tension* remains the fact that the brazen twist, the act here that shatters movie decorum—that Marie is actually the mad killer—is not either (a) internally consistent with the preceding hour, or (b) intellectually honest.

In short, the film does not play fair with the audience. The film *Aja* that sought to make, I believe, is one in which we witness the ultimate evolution or perhaps punctuation of the popular 1980s slasher paradigm. After all, this is the film that firmly places the Final Girl and the Mad Killer—formerly dedicated opponents, always at odds—in the same physical body.

In other words, *High Tension* is very much like seeing Michael Myers unmasked only to reveal Jamie Lee Curtis (or Laurie Strode) beneath the Shatner mask. This Norman-Bates-ification of the feminine/masculine Final Girl archetype has been a long time coming. In forty years, the Final Girl has gone from damsel-in-distress and lucky survivor (*Halloween*), to resourceful fighter and combatant (Nancy Thompson in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* with her home-made boobey traps), to maternal/sisterly defender (Ripley in *Aliens*; Kirsty in *Hellraiser 2*; Regina in *Night of the Comet*) to the ultimate savior of the world itself (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*).

With no more “outer” worlds to conquer, perhaps, the Final Girl turns inward in *High Tension*, confronting a roiling, resentful, splintered psychology. The monster is no longer an “outside” force but rather one determinedly located inside. In *High Tension*, we are clearly meant to understand that Marie's sexual desire for Alex is the root cause of her murderous other persona. She is gay, and perhaps self-loathing because of her sexuality. Or at least that is one reading.

Again, this aspect of the film is very true to horror movie lineage: *repression never stays down in the genre*; it bolts back up—like a killer from the dead—as psychological symptoms or as murderous action. Here, Marie's repression of her sexuality has created a rampaging monster. One who is, rather significantly, a physically ugly male.

If the Final Girl has often represented virginity and virtue in the horror genre; the killer has many times represented, the opposite. The male killer is often dirty like Freddy or simultaneously repellent/attractive like Pinhead. And he is often depicted “penetrating” something ... usually nubile flesh. The male killer is thus the catalyst that activates the Final Girl. Whether with a drill, a machete or a chainsaw, it is the killer who instigates.

When Marie is driven to murderous rage in *High Tension*, her insanity configures itself as an ugly man to commit the untoward deeds; the dirtiest, filthiest man imaginable. The Final Girl is left merely as

a witness, a bystander, as part of her exorcises her boogeyman-side.

Frankly, this is a terrific and thoughtful conceit, and one must respect and admire *High Tension* for executing so inventive a notion: the killer and his quarry being one-in-the-same *biologically* but divided *psychologically*.

Where *High Tension* must be faulted, however, is in cheating the specifics of this “twist” (this movie-decorum shattering situation). The form of the twist doesn’t ring true. It doesn’t smell right; even if thematically there is a validity to it. Indeed, *High Tension* builds a strong *thematic* case for the splintering of Marie’s psyche, first by the opening dream about her “running” from herself; and secondly by linking the arrival of the killer with Marie’s unfulfilled sexual desire, specifically the masturbation sequence. Gut wise, we can believe this. The character motive seems right, or at least believable.

But visually? In terms of film grammar? *High Tension* fails the smell test on this front. Film is primarily a visual art term, and viewers watch in *High Tension*, as Marie witnesses the brutal massacre of Alex’s family. At one point, the camera even adopts Marie’s point of view inside a closet—*through slats, no less*—as Mom gets her throat slit. So, if *High Tension*’s twist is to be believed, this shot is a lie. We were not seeing through Marie’s eyes at all. She was never even in the closet. She was outside the closet, doing the killing.

There are more egregious issues of internal inconsistency too. The audience witnesses Alex and Marie arriving at the house in a car. Viewers see the killer arrive separately in a truck, and his headlights cast blue illumination on the family pets (a dog and a parrot). Now, realistically, only one of these realities can be true. If Marie is actually the only visitor to the farm, the murderer being a figment of her sexual jealousy and rage, then there can only be either a car or a truck, but not both. If the truck, like the male killer, is only a figment of Marie’s psyche—her murderous imagination—then how come the light reflects on the animals?

Non-existent headlights don’t cast light on real life objects, do they?

But the incongruity goes further still. The male killers throw Alex into the truck and drives away. If there is no truck in reality, then where is Alex actually kept during this spell of the movie? Regardless of whom is actually chasing her, a male killer or Marie acting as the male killer, Alex *has to physically be somewhere* at all times in the narrative. If the truck doesn’t exist, then where is Alex while Marie confronts the male killer?

The film’s final chase finds Marie grabbing a circular saw device from the truck and chasing down Alex with it. The saw came from inside the truck.

But there is no truck, right? It’s all in Marie’s mind.

So, what is Marie *really* chasing Alex with, and where did she get it? The saw may be family, but it’s not magic. It can’t come out of nowhere.

Again and again *High Tension* confronts the audience with events that represent physical impossibilities. Marie can’t have arrived in the farmhouse in both a car (with Alex driving) and in a truck. If she didn’t come in the truck (just the car), then how does she take a saw out of the truck (that was never there?) If she followed Alex later, in the truck (not in the car), then her dream (about chasing herself) didn’t happen; and she never actually even met Alex’s family. She never saw Alex showering then, either, and thus her anger was never stoked (hence activating her alter ego).

Even the details of the family massacre don’t stand up to scrutiny. The Dad hears the doorbell ring and walks down the stairs to the front door. He lets the male killer in. At this point, Marie is upstairs. If Marie actually did the killing as the explanatory flashback at the denouement reveals, she wouldn’t have had to come from the outside of the house at all, she was already inside. And if she didn’t come from outside, the father wouldn’t have walked down the stairs in response to the sound of the doorbell, which, as audience members, we hear.

So, who rang the doorbell? Doorbells don’t ring themselves, and neither do angry psyches.

The two realities that are depicted visually in *High Tension* do not fit together—they are not consistent with one another. They actually contradict each other. For the film to work, we would have to believe that objects (like the circular saw, or the truck) appear out of nowhere and then go back to nowhere. The only answer that allows for the possibility of both versions of reality is that the entire film

consists of a fever dream; a fantasy. Marie's early nightmare might be a reason for favoring this dream interpretation. Also, in the killer's first scene, the severed head he tosses on the ground from his truck belongs to Alex, a character not as yet dead in the film, in either version of reality. So perhaps everything in *High Tension* is a fantasy, the lunatic thoughts of a mad, jealous woman. Perhaps we are seeing the whole film from inside Marie's mind and nothing at all is real.

Yet if everything that we see—or that seems—is but a dream within a dream, then nothing in *High Tension* matters. *Nothing at all*. It might as well be set on Mars, because there really are no rules. Pigs could fly out of Marie's butt in one scene, for instance, and that too would fit the dream. The dream explanation covers a plethora of trespasses, but it also castrates the movie. Because for a scary movie to succeed in scaring us, we must relate to it. We must identify with the characters. We must believe the characters are in danger. We must believe that the threat of the killer is real, even if the identity of the killer is a secret or a surprise. We must fear for the hero, even if the hero has a secret. But if *High Tension* is all a dream, as we must conclude, there is nothing at stake. Nothing is scary.

In a way, *High Tension* looks a lot like what some people accuse M. Night Shyamalan films of being: poorly constructed plots that hinge on a stupid twist ending. *High Tension* even invokes the oft-derided (in Shyamalan films) explanatory flashback, revealing Marie killing Alex's family and a convenience store clerk.

This flashback scene is simply a bridge too far.

High Tension stages the initial murder scenes with both the male killer and Marie in the same proximate space (often just feet from each other). But then it goes back and says that no, only Marie was there doing the killing, therefore undercutting the dream interpretation I mentioned; the only interpretation that could possibly make sense of the proceedings. In other words, the movie tries to have it both ways.

Let's tackle this from another angle. How would you feel if in *Psycho*, you really saw Mother Bates killing Marion in the shower, and during the attack, Norman came in and tried to wrestle the knife from Dear Old Mum? Only later—in a flashback—you found out that there was no Mother there at all. Thus, nobody for whom Norman to wrestle.

Thus, the earlier scene was a lie.

You'd feel cheated, wouldn't you?

You'd feel tricked. And that is why, in addition to being internally inconsistent, *High Tension* is intellectually dishonest. Could it have been a different way? Yes, it could have, and that's one of the most frustrating things about the film. This movie could have been effectively streamlined to remain more or less consistent. Aja could have removed the truck all together, the circular saw too, and other elements as well. In doing so, he could have told entirely the same story, but in a way that was more believable, and internally consistent.

What if there was just one vehicle, and the weapon of choice was something from the farmhouse? That would eliminate this sort of chicken-and-egg argument, wouldn't it? What if—at times—Marie blacked out, and during those times, we saw the male killer committing murders? Then there would be some wiggle room for the ending to feel intellectually honest. And the final explanatory flashback would have been a humdinger instead of a WTF moment.

The late Roger Ebert awarded *High Tension* one paltry star, but not on the basis of its impossibilities, rather on the brutal nature of the piece (and the bad dubbing). Despite this author's reservations, the film is worthy of at least two-and-a-half stars out of four for style. The final act undoes much of the film's good work, but the film is brutal and never anything less than fascinating.

Bottom line: *Psycho* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* took the genre ball and ran with it; evolving the horror movie format in the process and reaching their goal line. *High Tension* gets the ball, runs forward a bit, and then fumbles it. By forcing viewers to accept physical impossibilities or even countenance the idea that the entire movie is a dream, *High Tension* becomes less scary, less horrific, less involving. Audiences step back and withhold belief instead of becoming more deeply absorbed. Audiences distance themselves from the material instead of embracing it. And that dilutes the terror.

High Tension? Overall, it was a good game, but that last act—it's a flag on the play.

Hostel ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Roth differs from a lot of contemporary torment-horror filmmakers in that he has a knack for persuasive storytelling and knows how to film gross-out porn suspensefully, not just grotesquely."—Bob Strauss, *Chicago Tribune*: "Check in if you dare," January 7, 2006, 25.

"*Hostel* travels some well-worn canals, but with enough unsettling differences to keep you on your metaphorical toes."—Katherine Monk, *CanWest News*, January 5, 2006, page 1.

"The action-packed sequences, full of violent imagery, coupled with tremendous sound design, make the film cringeworthy and thrilling at once."—Dan Gross, *Philadelphia Daily News*: "*Hostel* environment: Eli Roth's film is classic horror," January 6, 2002, page 30.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jay Hernandez (Paxton); Derek Richardson (Josh); Eythor Gudjonsson (Oli); Barbara Nedeljakova (Natalya); Jan Vlasak (The Dutch Businessman); Jane Kaderabkova (Svetlana); Jennifer Lim (Kana); Keiko Seiko (Yuki); Lubomir Bukovy (Alex); Jana Havlickova (Vala); Rick Hoffman (American Client); Petr Janis (German Surgeon).

CREW: Lionsgate Films, Net Entertainment, and Raw Nerve presents *Hostel*. Casting: Kelly Martin Wagner. Costume Designer and Production Designer: Franco-Giacomo Carbone. Special Effects: KNB Effects Group, Precinct 13 Entertainment. Music Nathan Barr. Director of Photography: Milan Chadima. Film Editor: George Folsy, Jr. Producers: Chris Briggs, Mike Fleiss, Eli Roth. Executive Producers: Scott Spiegel, Quentin Tarantino, Boaz Yakin. Written and Directed by: Eli Roth. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two wayward American youths, Paxton (Hernandez) and Josh (Richardson), debauch themselves on a vacation across the European continent. They smoke weed in Amsterdam, and Paxton engages in group sex with hookers. It's a European decadence tour, with Icelandic buddy Oli (Gudjonsson) along for the ride. Before long, Paxton, Josh and Oli are duped into visiting an out-of-the-way Hostel in Slovakia where the women are said to "love" Americans. What Josh and Paxton discover in Slovakia, however, is not paradise, but an underworld that includes a torture-for-profit business named Elite Hunting, run by callous locals. There, the world's rich and powerful pay big money to torture, maim and murder their fellow man. First Oli disappears, and then Josh, leaving Paxton to learn the horrifying truth in a grotesque torture chamber.

COMMENTARY: I was at the Toronto Film Festival the same year that director Eli Roth brought *Hostel* there. In fact, we appeared on the same TV program, *Saturday Night at the Movies*, to discuss our fondness for an American horror movie classic, *The Bad Seed*, but our paths never actually crossed. If they had, I would have asked for his autograph and enthused that *Hostel* is the horror film that the 2000s, and torture porn, were waiting for.

In its own way, *Hostel* is transgressive and ground-breaking, because it slaps viewers in the face with a realization that we like to steadfastly ignore in our everyday lives. *Hostel* explicitly bursts the bubble of American superiority. Americans believe, and Hollywood has also led us to believe that we are invincible; the chosen ones.

We're the shining city on the hill!

It's morning in America!

I'll always believe in a place called Hope!

And on and on.

We have so mythologized ourselves many Americans live in denial of the fact that death is still an

everyday occurrence for human beings. Just because we have Starbucks and I-Phones doesn't mean that we're immortal. We think we are above—and separate from—the rest of the world when in fact, we are connected to it.

The audience learns this powerful lesson along with the film's characters, and Eli Roth reveals the horror of torture, by visually landing us—his viewership—in his evil torture chair. Despite all the cries from moral guardians of how twisted and perverse this movie is, you will notice that Roth *never* adopts the point of view of the killer or torturer.

On the contrary, when he turns to the subjective first person shot it is always from the perspective of the person being tortured. In other words, we are seeing through the eyes of the person suffering; not the person causing the suffering. This fact alone should serve to defend the film against cries that it is immoral, or somehow engendering blood lust. Quite the opposite, this movie asks you to sympathize with those who are treated so horribly. To give us a real-world example: *Hostel* asks the audience to imagine what it must be like to be incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay; or in Abu-Ghraib: without hope, terrified, lost.

The first such P.O.V. shot involves Josh awakening in the torture chamber. He is wearing a hood and can see only through a small round eye slit. The majority of the frame is blacked out, save for a small iris, where he sees his torturer approaching.

Later, Roth adopts the P.O.V. shot again when Paxton is captured at the factory.

It is thus *our* hands we see scraping the walls of the factory; *our* feet we see dragging the floor. Excepting 3-D, and until virtual reality becomes available, this is as close visually as viewers can get to going through the horrific experience endured by these characters.

What Roth is doing here is intentional and important: he is revealing that Americans—if they foolishly venture out of their delusional bubble—might awake to the reality of “blowback,” the notion that our government's policy, in this case the suspension of those “quaint” Geneva Conventions, might have actually made the world a much less safe place. In other words, the message of the film is that you reap what you sow.

The film's second transgressive aspect is the *explanation* behind the torture. In *Hostel*, the transgression (human-on-human torture) is not motivated by twisted psychology, sexual domination, or cannibalism, but rather an American value we have exported to the rest of the world like a religion: *capitalism*. The evil committed in *Hostel* is meted in the name of the market, free enterprise and the pursuit of the almighty dollar. It's done to make the locals rich and nothing more.

Remember or example, in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* how it was shocking and horrific that the cannibals didn't even want to have sex with their victims. Sally Hardesty offered herself to the clan and they rejected her outright. To the cannibals she was merely ingredients for dinner.

The same sort of alarming, inhuman distance is on display in *Hostel*. Only here, the value of the characters, their worth, is in what money they can draw. Josh begs his torturer to stop, noting that he will “pay” him. The torturer responds, horribly, by informing Josh that he's the one who is paying.

So, Josh is not an ingredient in a stew, he is a mere commodity to be bought and sold and used as the highest bidder sees fit. His life, his dreams of becoming a writer are unimportant because the market has dictated that his highest worth is as torture fodder. Thus, *Hostel* reveals a terror just as powerful as Leatherface's. Whether we are ingredients or a commodity, we have been devalued as human beings in a most horrific way. “*You can pay to do anything*,” one character is explicitly told in the film; a statement that reveals the triumph of capitalism and the American way.

What seems so frightening in both cases is the notion of encountering an individual who doesn't share our human values; one who is a sociopath and doesn't care if he snuffs out life; or one who murders innocent people to achieve an ideological goal. But what is so compelling about *Hostel* is the fucking *irony*. The irony that Josh and Paxton have run into callous killers who have learned the exported lessons of America too well.

And those lessons are (1) let the market decide, and (2) torture is okay when push comes to shove. We have exported these values, just like our Big Macs, to the rest of the world in the Bush era, and it should come as a surprise to no one that the rest of the world is starting to get the message.

On a more basic “scare” level, a horror movie is effective when viewers are able to put themselves in the place of the lead character and sympathize with what they go through; usually some kind of universal human fear. *Hostel* is frightening because it captures the universal human feeling of powerlessness. The characters in the film are strapped down to a chair, bound and gagged, and unable to move or escape. This is an ancillary fear to being buried alive: the notion that you are trapped, immobile and at the mercy of someone else. In *Hostel*, this fear is palpable and carefully exploited. It’s not that there’s nowhere to run; it’s that there’s no way to run.

A great horror movie should be reflexive as well as transgressive, and *Hostel* fits that bill too. Midway through the film, while in search of the missing Oli, Josh and Paxton visit a torture museum, a shrine to the arcane tools that, across our history, have maimed, wounded and killed people. The question this visit raises is: why, as human beings do we tend to be fascinated with devices like these?

By inference then, Roth is also asking his viewership, why do we like movies such as *Hostel*? What draws us in? What element of the human psyche craves this darkness, and relishes the act of causing others pain, or the voyeurism of seeing pain inflicted on others? I have my answers, and they involve catharsis, primarily, but *Hostel* addresses this issue in an oblique and interesting way.

The film is reflexive in other ways too. It relates directly to horror film history in that Josh and Paxton stay in room 237 of the hostel; which is the “evil” room number from Stanley Kubrick’s 1980 masterpiece, *The Shining* (which also charted the dark, twisted recesses of the human mind). On a more global, political level, the film clearly has soaked up the zeitgeist of the post-9/11/“War on Terror” age. For instance, when Paxton scores with Svetlana and sees that the virginal and sexually ambivalent Josh has done so with Netalya, he enthusiastically states “*Mission Accomplished*,” a direct reference to President Bush’s premature announcement from the deck of an aircraft carrier of the end of major combat operations in Iraq.

The comment means the same thing in both contexts. Both Paxton and Bush believed they had won the day; unaware that they had actually met their Waterloo.

An example of torture porn, *Hostel* is gory but not outrageously so, save for the over-the-top and somewhat unsuccessful eye-gasm scene. What makes the film powerful and scary is not just its tapping of a universal fear (of entrapment and immobility) but in its reckoning that our existence is one dominated by random fate.

Lives hang in the balance, seemingly decided by a roll of the dice. A door that locks unexpectedly, or an ability to speak German mean the difference between life or death for characters in the film. *Hostel* also shares something in common with the slasher genre, because vice precedes slice-and-dice. The characters suffer horrible fates after badly misbehaving with drugs and sex. Moral lapses are punished with torture in some instances.

Indeed, like the slasher films of the 1980s, one might make a case that there’s a very conservative argument at work here. Specifically, early in the film, the boys visit a whorehouse and Josh opens a door only to be rebuffed by the occupants inside. They tell him to get out unless he wants to pay to see what they are doing. At the end of the film, Paxton bursts into a torture dungeon to rescue an Asian girl named Kana and is told by the torturer to leave unless he wants to pay to see what’s going on. “*Get your own fucking room! I paid for this!*”

This line explicitly connects prostitution with torture, and so the argument seems to be that if a culture gets too permissive, it’s a slippery slope. One day, it’s free sex, the next day murder and torture for profit. Although one can legitimately argue this is merely an extension of the film’s critique of capitalism, there’s a case to be made for the conservative argument too.

Some reviewers who object to the film do so on the basis that the characters aren’t particularly likable or honorable. I agree that this is the case. Josh and Paxton objectify women to an alarming degree, and as is typical of our culture, engage in anti-gay slurs to belittle the manhood of others (everybody they don’t like is a faggot). There is constant discussion of “sneepur” (Icelandic for “clit”), pussy, and so forth. However, every bit of this characterization is 100 percent intentional. The point of *Hostel*—you reap what you sow—would not be possible without first charting, at least to a degree, American arrogance.

Paxton and Josh represent that quality perfectly. They are on tour for selfish reasons, to build some memorable experiences before turning to their careers, they treat women as receptacles, they engage in drugs, and they invite those they don't like to "kiss my American ass." The film involves taking these characters down a notch; introducing them to a larger world outside the bubble of American superiority and safety. Without showing such behavior, this point wouldn't be made. At least not so cogently.

Despite the callow nature of the film's protagonists, the audience feels for them as their lives turn sour. These two youths had dreams and futures in mind. Paxton tells a story about his youth, and a girl who drowned at Lake Michigan, that explains a lot about him, and Josh is awkward and dorky not in a typical movie way, but in a very real, uncomfortable way. I went to college with guys just like Paxton and Josh. One of my best friends, in fact, looked and sounded and acted exactly like Josh. These characters are recognizable if not deep, and ultimately you come to care that they are imperiled. This doesn't mean that they are a pair of Einsteins, but that's part of the film's message too: the lure here is no deeper than Paxton's Beavis and Butthead-like exclamation "juggs!" when he sees a naked woman in the hostel spa.

Hostel is far more accomplished than critics gave it credit for. There's even an economic argument underlying the film. In *Hostel*, the old factory is ruined, of no use, until it is re-purposed in the new global economy ... as a torture dungeon. The film features many artful long shots revealing the desolation of the landscape; vast, empty industrial fields, where nothing is being manufactured or produced. In a world like this, people grow desperate. I would never condone torture, but if it were the only major industry of your town (the only way to "put food on your family" as President Bush might turn a phrase), would it be so easy to walk away from?

Roth makes this point in two ways. First, he shows us the "workers" in the torture chamber. There's a lumbering old hunchback whose job it is to cut up the body parts of the dead and throw them into the furnace. Not very nice, but it pays the bills.

Secondly, the film's opening sequence reveals a dungeon being hosed clean, while on the soundtrack, an unseen worker whistles contentedly. These sequences reveal two things. First, they make it plain that this is a business and that like any business, people work there to get by. Secondly, by showing how torture has become an industry, Roth is able to express the idea that human beings can close down their emotions and do anything, *anything*, if it's a matter of economic survival.

I'm not going to argue that *Hostel* is pleasant. But it is scary, intelligent, occasionally humorous in a macabre way, and highly relevant to the time in which it was created.

House of Wax * * *

Critical Reception

"There are probably more than a few horror movie fans who believe the genre has become increasingly unoriginal in recent years. And while *House of Wax* is a modern adaptation of an old Vincent Price movie, it doesn't quite deserve the negative reaction that's preceded its release.... This movie was surprising. It had a good story—not too complicated, got straight to the point and dished out what makes movies fun. The only major downfall is, of course, Paris Hilton. Her presence alone is turning people away, but that's a silly reason. Heck, Jennifer Lopez is a terrible actress, but that doesn't stop people from seeing her films."—Dominic Van Deuren, *Green Bay Press Gazette*: "House of Wax not deserving of bad rap," May 13, 2005, page D1.

"There's really nothing much to say about the plot. The film is rather predictable (one by one each teenager is picked off), has its share of gore, and in the end the good guy and gal win. But the truth is, these teenagers all deserve to die because they're nosy, arrogant and stupid! Uhh, I just lost my train of thought for a sec. What I really meant to say was: *House of Wax* delivers a wax load of energy and will make you laugh and cringe at the same time. Go figure."—*Natasha Grant*: "House of Wax is lifeless," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 5, 2005, page 20.

"*House of Wax*—the Dark Castle Entertainment reimagining of the 1953 film of the same name—might be best known for the stunt casting of Paris Hilton, the multi-millionaire socialite whose face and antics were

inescapable throughout the mid-aughties. Horror fans and Hilton haters checking out *House* solely to see her get killed would not be disappointed, as she receives the most protracted death scene in the film. What might surprise them, though, is that *House of Wax* is actually a lot of fun (and so is Hilton's performance).

A group of stock horror characters (the jock, the bad boy, the Final Girl, and so on) head out of town for a big football game. They encounter a series of plot devices and end up themselves stranded in a very strange small town. After seeking aid at the local House of Wax, they are picked off one by one by a weirdo killer. In the goopy, gooey grand finale, the survivors learn that the entire town is made of wax. Yes, the *House of Wax* is a literal house of wax, get it? The filmmakers aren't going for subtlety here, and that's true in every regard. This film is brutal, far more than anyone expected in a mainstream release starring Elisha Cuthbert of 24. Even she, as the Final Girl, is not spared from the kind of violence that makes audiences squirm in their seats. *House of Wax* is rated R and it truly earns the rating with practical FX and gore that would do Tom Savini proud.

The friendship between Cuthbert's Carly and Hilton's Paige is a surprisingly sweet and supportive one, the kind that was all-too rare in horror films of this era, the kind that gets you hoping that they'll both make it to the end credits. It's a nice bit of emotional weight (just a bit, mind you) in this absolutely bonkers movie. *House of Wax* is the haunted house attraction at a traveling carnival: it's loud, it's dumb, it's interesting to look at, it's a memorably good time, and there might even be a few scares along the way."—Stacie Ponder, horror scholar and blogger.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Elisha Cuthbert (Carly Jones); Chad Michael Murray (Nick); Brian Van Holt (Bo); Paris Hilton (Paige); Jared Padalecki (Wade); Jon Abrahams (Dalton); Robert Ri'chard (Blake); Dragitsa Debert (Trudy Sinclair); Thomas Adamson (Young Bo); Murray Smith (Dr. Sinclair); Sam Harkess (Young Vincent); Damon Herriman (Roadkill Driver); Andy Anderson (Sheriff).

CREW: Warner Bros. and Village Roadshow Pictures, in association with Dark Castle Entertainment, present *House of Wax*. Casting: Mary Gail Artz, Barbara Cohen. Costume Designer: Alex Alvarez, Graham Purcell. Production Designer: Graham Walker. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, New Deal Studios, Photon VFX. Music: John Ottman. Director of Photography: Stephen Windon. Film Editor: Joel Negron. Producers: Susan Downey, Joel Silver, Robert Zemeckis. Executive Producers: Bruce Berman, Herbert W. Gains. Story by: Charles Belden. Written by: Chad and Carey Hayes. Directed by: Jaume Collet-Serra. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 118 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of young adults—including Carly (Cuthbert); her brother Nick (Murray); boyfriend Wade (Padalecki); another couple, Paige (Hilton) and Blake (Ri'chard); and Nick's buddy, Dalton (Abrahams)—head out on a road trip in Louisiana to attend a football game. They stop in a wooded, remote area for the night, and have an encounter with a menacing pick-up truck. The next morning, the friends find that their car won't start, apparently because of a broken fan belt. In hopes of repairing it, they head to the nearest town, which seems abandoned. The most prominent landmark there is "Trudy's World-Famous Wax Museum." Soon, Paige and others learn the attraction's secret: all the waxwork "statues" are built over very real, flesh-and-blood people, or rather corpses. There are two deranged killers at work in the town, brothers Vincent and Bo, who would like to add the interlopers to their museum.

COMMENTARY: This loose remake of the 1953 horror classic *House of Wax* actually shares far more in common with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the 1979 road-trip-gone-wrong film *Tourist Trap* than its source material. *House of Wax* is in the same genre, with a bunch of youngsters on an ill-fated trip, taking a detour into inexplicable and inescapable terror.

Like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *House of Wax* pits one family of siblings, Carly and Nick, against another represented by Vincent and Bo. Boosted by some of the most incredible and horrific special effects seen in a horror film in the decade of the 2000s, the film also features a fairly profound undercurrent about America itself, in the new age, being a house of wax. Tagged by critics as just the next bad remake of the week, *House of Wax* received unjustly negative (even savage) reviews, when the

fact of the matter it is a very entertaining, fun horror film cast in the mold of older, cherished titles, such as *Friday the 13th*.

Although never treading too deep, *House of Wax* suggests that “The American Dream” of the 1950s and 1960s is now built on shaky foundations. It’s a façade, like the town of Beaumont. Towns that were once thriving are now abandoned, passed over except by the desperate, or lost. The movie theatre in town is showing *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* That movie carries relevance because of its focus on twisted siblings (like Bo and Vincent here), but also just for its title.

What Happened to Small Town America?

Only fifteen miles off the main road, the town of Beaumont has obviously been passed over for strip malls, Walmarts and franchise fast food restaurants, all consumer experiences that cater to American desires to be served quickly and conveniently. The generation that might have enjoyed the “thrill” of visiting a wax museum is now gone. The new generation carries video cameras all the time and tries to get internships at *InStyle Magazine*. The presence of Paris Hilton, famous for recording a sex tape as her audition, essentially, for Hollywood stardom, is perfectly cast in the film. She is a reminder of how much things have changed in America since 1953 and the source material’s 3-D premiere.

At one point in the action, one of the imperiled young adults says with alarm “*the whole town is rigged*,” which was an observation being made widely in a decade of recession, tax cuts for the rich, and a shrinking middle class. All the artifices upon which Americans rely to succeed and flourish are here, but have lost their meaning, their substance. One of the key “wax” locations is a church, for instance, where a waxwork dummy plays the organ. The music is real (though recorded), but the soul, the heart of the place is gone. Instead, there’s just a surface, a veneer of reality, of religion, at work here. The same is true of the car repair store, which represents the corruption of economics in 2000s America. The shop doesn’t actually fix anything.

The film thus suggests the hollowness of the American Dream in the 2000s. If America is itself considered, the “House of Wax” of the title, it all comes tumbling down in a show-stopping, climactic scene. The Wax Museum melts to the ground on-screen, a mere illusion where something of substance once stood. Like *Session 9*, *House of Wax* feels like a movie about the haunted present that America was living in during the 2000s. The ghosts of the Vietnam War, and the Ronald Reagan years (and trickle-down or voodoo economics) are the ghosts that Americans were contending with during the decade, via the War on Terror, and another economically regressive Republican Administration. Policies that had failed in the past were resurrected and failed all over again. Lessons learned went unheeded. America was trapped in a time loop of bad leadership and poor decision-making. No one was looking out for Beaumont, yet on Beaumont went, a shell of what it once was, a façade, a fun house amusement park exhibit of a vanished prosperity.

The same comparison seems to occur in terms of families. Bo and Vincent are from an economically disadvantaged family, one of abuse and pathology, and yet, they stick together in their terrifying and anti-social enterprises. Carly and Nick are part of a family that seems just as pathological, and ultimately their relationship is a loyal one too. The film suggests that families from diverse, economically varied backgrounds all face the same apocalypse in America but stick together through it all.

House of Wax features many common tropes of the road trip or detour horror movie. The protagonist’s car, naturally, won’t start. The survivors, on the run, find a “lost and found” room of belongings: cars and cell phones, for example, of other victims, who didn’t escape. And yet, the conceit, the organizing principle of the wax museum, and the waxwork American town, grant the film a sense of freshness and newness that the familiar plot-devices and tropes simply can’t mitigate.

There is something to be said for a fun, direct, exciting horror movie like *House of Wax*. It is well-made, and spectacular in visualization. The death scenes are inventive, and if one chooses, there is a way to read the story and subtext in a way that grants the whole enterprise meaning. The film is entertaining, not angsty and enjoyable scary, but not gloom-laden. The term “guilty pleasure” is not one that this author likes to employ. Why should one be guilty about what one enjoys, if there is value to be found there? *House of Wax* puts on a good show for horror fans and deserves deeper analysis from critics who

saw a remake with Paris Hilton and dismissed it out of hand.

The film's *House of Wax* melts convincingly on-screen, but the movie itself boasts a solid foundation and has stood the test of time.

Kairo (DTV) * * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kumiko Aso (Michi Kudo); Haruhiko Rys (Duke Kawashima); Koyuki (Harue Karasawa); Kurume Arisaka (Junko Sasano); Masatoshi Matsuo (Toshio Yabe); Shinji Takeda (Yoshizaki); Jenji Mizuhashi (Taguchi); Jun Fubuki (Michi's Mother); Shun Sugata (Boss); Koji Yakusho (Ship Captain);

CREW: Toho Company, Daiei Eiga, Hakuho, Imagica, and Nippon Television Network Present *Kairo*. Production Designer: Tomoyuki Maruo. Music: Takefumi Haketa. Director of Photography: Jun'ichiro Hayashi. Film Editor: Jun'ichi Kikuchi. Producers: Ken Inoue, Seiji Okuda, Shun Shimizu, Atsuyuki Shimoda, Hiroshi Yamamoto. Executive Producer: Yasuyoshi Takuma. Written and Directed by: Kiyoshi Kurosawa. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 119 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Tokyo, Michi Kudo (Aso) tries to help a friend in need, Taguchi (Mizuhashi), but encounters something bizarre and terrifying. Taguchi has hanged himself and left a note behind about a “*forbidden room*,” a doorframe with red tape encircling it. This mystery expands dramatically, as all over Japan, ghosts bleed over into the mortal coil, seeking to remediate the “*eternal loneliness of death*.” As the apocalypse grows and the walls between worlds crumble, a few survivors set out by ship for South America, hoping to survive.

COMMENTARY: In his poem, *Hollow Men* (1925), T.S. Eliot warned us that “*This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but with a whimper*.” *Kairo*, later remade in the U.S. as the very different (but also, worthwhile) *Pulse* (2006), embodies this notion, striking a mournful note for a world that because of the isolating impact of modern technology (computers, etc.) seems to have become an uninteresting, nay empty realm for the living, thereby creating a kind of existential crisis for all mankind.

An elegy, *Kairo*, not unlike the American effort *White Noise* (2005), suggests a thin membrane separating the worlds of the living and the dead. Early in the film, for example, Kudo sees Taguchi behind a plastic drape, his form not quite distinct. This image and other compositions suggest the bleed-over from the land of the living to the land of the dead. The two worlds are close in proximity, but not totally aligned.

This film serves as a lament for a world not just lost, but veritably sacrificed on the altar of new technology. This monument to death is accompanied by a strange symphony, the sounds of our devices, the ubiquitous modems that gurgle and telephones that ring. Again, the idea is that in focusing all of our attention on technologies such as computers, telephones and whatnots, this world has suffered a loss. This leitmotif makes *Kairo* part of the pack of 2000s horror movies that focus on the notion of man's devices of convenience, work and leisure harming him, or serving as gateways to evil/destruction. Titles in this group include *FearDotcom*, *The Ring*, and *One Missed Call*.

The “*eternal loneliness*” of death in *Kairo* has been read by some critics as a commentary on the connected life of the Web 2.0 age. This time of heightened connectivity online is felt by many to be a two-edged sword. Instead of fostering creativity and new friendships as intended, online connectivity seems to breed social awkwardness, heighten resentments, and create distance between people in this brick and mortar world.

According to Giles A. Viennot in the essay *Kairo* (*Pulse*, *Kurasawa*, 2001, and *Kairos*): *Post-modern Japanese computer Culture, Memory and Entropy*, the film obsesses on those who have lost track of the boundary between the real and digital worlds. The movie “*details the heart-rending fates of individuals, shut away, in dark places, trapped by the videos of contagious, ghostly humans in recursive, infinite images*

Accordingly, a deep melancholy suffuses the apocalyptic *Kairo*. It is a slow-burn type of horror film with some genuinely shocking images, such as the downing of a cargo plane in mid-air, and the specter of people leaving behind nothing more than a stain on the wall, after their demise. Perhaps it is more accurate to call those stains “*the handwriting on the wall*,” because, as the film makes plain, human existence as it has been is drifting to an end.

Some characters in the film “*choose to keep going into the future*,” on a ship bound for South America, but it feels like an empty gesture in this apocalypse. This realm is abandoned, dying, and ending with Eliot’s sad, quiet whimper.

Mournful and deeply creepy, *Kairo* makes the most of its creepy premise, that “*nothing changes with death*.”

We’re all just logging on again, listening to other lonely voices.

Land of the Dead * * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“A funny thing happened while George Romero was hibernating: his genre had been hijacked by a new generation. Creators of modern remakes (Marcus Nispel, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and Zack Snyder, *Dawn of the Dead*) and spoofs (Eli Roth, *Cabin Fever* and Edgar Wright, *Shawn of the Dead*) took Romero’s original vision and infused it with modern humor, technology, and sensibility. None of the four above films ran like retreads because of polished acting and visual artistry. So, when Romero returned to recapture the crown as ‘The King of Horror,’ he sadly tripped on his way to the throne. *Land of the Dead*, the fourth in his Living Dead saga, lacks any of the nuances found in his 70s classics or in the above works.

The dead may rise, but I think I’ll stick with the Generation X’s version. Romero’s revelation appeared as dead as the cast.”—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

“*Land of the Dead* is a transitional film, and not in a good way. As a film it’s fine, but it represents the transition from George A. Romero’s classic period into his ... well ... less than classic period. Borrowing many elements from Romero’s original concept for *Day of the Dead*, it’s a slick, highly polished, well produced film that shows Romero dipping his feet into the CGI well, and I’m not sure Romero really understood what that meant—his films, primarily his partnership with Tom Savini and the crew at KNB that Savini spawned, showcased practical effects at their most extreme (no apologies to John Carpenter and *The Thing*—Romero got there first). CGI, particularly in its early days, represented a watered-down reality, and some of Romero’s bite was gone in this film. It feels separate from his ‘Unholy Trilogy’ of Dead films that came before. And Romero’s later films, whether or not you consider them part of a series or not, began to taste like the later glasses of lemonade when the lemons had run out and you flavor the new batch with some of the old, but it’s only that—lemonade-flavored lemonade

This is George Romero with money. And it’s just not as good as George Romero without money. *Day of the Dead* was widely criticized for being overly talky (and not as much fun as O’Bannon’s *Return of the Living Dead*), but it is still its own independent entry in that trilogy. *Land of the Dead* wasn’t made by the George A. Romero ‘family’—gone is cinematographer Michael Gornick. Gone are any members of his usual troupe of actors (save Savini with a questionable cameo as his character from *Dawn of the Dead*). But most importantly, the editor is not George A. Romero—the taste of this film is different. Same recipe but it feels like a different venue, even a different chef.

Still there is much that is good about the film. The performances across the board are great, and we actually see some name actors appearing in a Romero Dead film for the first (and last) time. Romero’s social commentary is on full display, but perhaps in the wrong decade (the excesses of the 1990s were already a distant memory in a post-9/11 America). Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg of *Shawn of the Dead* fame have a fun cameo as two chained zombies in the early part of the film. The evolution of the zombies, apparently now acquiring something like a social conscience, is interesting, and the Big Daddy zombie character is an interesting development from the Bub character of *Day of the Dead*—Bub was innocent but capable of loyalty—Big Daddy is full of rage and resentment, a natural product of a post-Rodney King world.

The Rodney King riots happened in 1992. *Day of the Dead* was released in the mid-1980s, and *Land of the*

Dead was Romero's first foray into the world of the undead since that time, so there's a sense that Romero gathered up tidbits of things to comment on over those two decades and was perhaps delivering critiques of problems that while certainly still present were not as relevant when this film was released. Romero's *Dead* films were marvelous litmus tests for the zeitgeist of different decades, and skipping the Nineties was unfortunate, and probably impacted this film. Romero's next visit to this universe, *Diary of the Dead*, lacked most of what made Romero's *Dead* films so special, so it seems even Romero was out of sorts in the new millennium.

Land of the Film is an enjoyable film in its own right. It is by no means a bad film. What it represents in Romero's film catalogue, however, is greatness beginning its decline, and to me, that always makes this film a little sad because Romero was such a treasure. But perhaps it's fitting—all of the *Dead* films are about transition from a fully living state to something less living yet still animated, still having the appearance of life. In that sense, this film, by the Big Daddy of this genre, is its own particular reanimation, but not quite itself. Herbert West would be amused."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Simon Baker (Riley Denbo); John Leguizamo (Cholo DeMora); Dennis Hopper (Kaufman); Asia Argento (Slack); Robert Joy (Charlie); Eugene Clark (Big Daddy); Joanne Boland (Pretty Boy); Tony Nappo (Foxy); Jennifer Baxter (Number 9); Boyd Banks (Butcher); Jasmin Geljo (Tambourine Man); Maxwell McCabe-Lokos (Mouse); Tony Munch (Anchor); Shawn Roberts (Mike); Pedro Miguel Arce (Pillsbury); Sasha Roiz (Manolete); Krista Bridges (Motown); Alan Van Sprang (Brubaker); Phil Fondacaro (Chihuahua); Bruce McFee (Mulligan); Earl Pastko (Roach); Jonathan Whittaker (Sutherland); Jonathan Walker (Cliff Woods); Peter Outerbridge (Styles).

CREW: Universal Pictures presents a Romero-Grunwald Production, in association with Wild Bunch, and Rangerkim, *Land of the Dead*. Casting: Marci Liroff. Costume Designer: Alex Kavanaugh. Production Designer: Arv Grewal. Music: Reinhold Heil, Johnny Klimek. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Spin VFX, Switch VFX. Director of Photography: Miroslaw Baszak. Film Editor: Michael Doherty. Produces: Mark Canton, Bernie Goldmann, Peter Grunwald. Executive Producers: Steve Barnett, Dennis E. Jones, Ryan Kavanaugh, Lynwood Spinks. Written and Directed by: George A. Romero. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the later years of the zombie apocalypse, a new human society has risen up around a Pittsburgh skyscraper called Fiddler Green, run by the wealthy businessman Paul Kaufman (Hopper). He and his ultra-rich compatriots live in the skyscraper while the poor populate the urban streets below. Kaufman's people are supplied and protected by a quasi-military operation which ventures out to nearby towns at night to raid them. These towns are populated by zombies. After one such attack, a self-aware, intelligent zombie, Big Daddy (Clark), awakens to the concept of "invasion" and gathers an army of the dead to march on Kaufman's empire. Inside the city, a power struggle also brews as a Kaufman's chief supplier, Cholo (Leguizamo), is denied permission to live in Fiddler's Green because of race. He steals Kaufman's primary engine of destruction, a vehicle called Dead Reckoning, to hold Kaufman hostage. Kaufman recruits the vehicle's designer, the independent-minded Denbo (Baker) to retrieve his property.

COMMENTARY: George A. Romero's *Land of the Dead* doesn't receive the love or respect that it ought to from Romero fans, in large part because of its mainstream nature. *Land of the Dead* had the widest theatrical release of any of Romero's *Dead* films, and also the highest budget. These concerns meant that the film could not feature gore at the level that fans of his earlier films were no doubt accustomed to. And yet, on close examination, the film possesses much more to say in terms of relevant social commentary, than does its immediate (and more lauded) predecessor, *Day of the Dead* (1985).

Some scholars have also complained because this is the first film in the *Dead* series to feature a "traditional" hero in the form of handsome, white male Simon Baker, as Denbo. Romero is renowned for featuring African Americans and women in leading roles in the previous franchise films, though this argument doesn't take into account the strong role here for non-Caucasian, John Leguizamo, who

motivates most of the action and the social commentary on race in America, even during the zombie apocalypse.

Finally, long-time fans hate the frequent use of CGI in the film, in a series that has long championed practical effects of the bloodiest, most imaginative nature.

Despite these issues, thematically this is a rich film. *Land of the Dead* features two threads of the same theme, explicitly involving race. The first thread involves Leguizamo's character. Cholo has toiled for the rich white man, Kaufman, for years, and done a great job in that capacity. He has kept Kaufman and his elite living in comfort, following the downfall of civilization. They have wanted for nothing. Cholo has made their priorities his priorities. Now as he retires, Cholo wishes to live among that elite, and share the benefits of his toils that his hard work has wrought. His application to live in the exclusive Fiddler's Green skyscraper is denied. There is no reason to deny his application except for his social status and race.

Cholo has reached the glass ceiling of the zombie apocalypse.

Cholo is trusted enough to work for the rich, white elite, but not valued enough to be a neighbor, to live among it. Ultimately, he is viewed as a servant. A useful servant perhaps, but nothing more. Cholo fashioned himself a member of a very exclusive club only to learn that it was an illusion.

The second strand of social commentary about race involves the zombies, a different "race" altogether than Kaufman and his "haves and have mores" (as George W. Bush once famously termed his "base"). As the film begins, these zombies live in peace in their American city. It's fascinating to see how Romero depicts the town that is attacked by Kaufman's raiders. It is a slice of apple pie Americana, but populated by zombies.

Some zombies are band members playing instruments. Others are cheerleaders, and young lovers. And visible in frame are the picturesque touchstones of American small-town life, from gazebos to white-picket fences.

Since the town is run by zombies, Romero's comment is a weird inversion of normal life. The zombies are living the American dream of peace and prosperity, safety and security. Observed by the raiders, the zombies are seen in terms of their evolution, or progress. "*They are trying to be us. They're learning how to be us again,*" the raiders observe. Then the zombies are attacked, and one exceptionally self-aware and intelligent zombie, an African American gas station attendant, rallies the zombie forces to strike back against the invaders.

There is much to unpack here.

First, the human raiders are Kaufman's elite, the 1 percent, in other words. They come to American towns and like vultures, take up the lion's share of the resources, leaving the rest of the town's denizens to do without. Remember, this was the era of George W. Bush's tax cuts for the rich, which added approximately 1.5 trillion to the national debt.¹⁷

While the rich got richer, the poor had to contend not just with the debt, but with cuts in public education and in other arenas of social welfare. The lion's share of the benefits of these tax cuts, enacted in 2001, went to top one percent of earners, according to the Tax Policy Center.¹⁸

In both Cholo's case and that of the zombies, a marginalized or "other" is sacrificed to maintain the (rich, white) lifestyle of the privileged elite. So, while there may not be a black man as a star of the film, *Land of the Dead* undeniably concerns race in a very substantial manner, in the fact that those not of a certain demographic don't get to share the wealth of the elite. This entire dynamic brings up George A. Romero's plea and refrain, "*what's it going to take to change?*"

Even in the apocalypse, Romero sees American society operating for the benefit of the few, at the expense of the many. As one-character notes "*They won't let me in there. They won't let you in there. We're the wrong kind.*"

This through-line is clearly about systemic racism.

But there's more social commentary here as well. And—*surprise, surprise*—it involves 9/11, or more accurately, the War on Terror. The zombies in their small happy town are distracted from Kaufman's attack, for example, by a deliberate campaign of "*shock and awe*," the rapid dominance tactic used by America in the attack on Iraq. In the film, zombies are easily distracted by fireworks. The vehicle

Dead Reckoning, as an opening salvo, blasts those firecrackers high in the air, effectively distracting the zombies from the details of the raid on their town. The invaders of the town (the humans; the Americans) then raid it for resources. If one considers the Iraq War a conflict about resources, and about America acquiring the oil wealth of a Middle East country, then again, the comparison tracks. The raiders in the film distract the peaceful zombie populace with shock and awe, and then proceed to rob the land of its resources (canned goods, alcohol, medical supplies, etc.).

This is where things get tricky, and, perhaps, political.

Agitprop filmmaker Michael Moore was roundly excoriated for scenes in his film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) which showed a peaceful Iraq before the “*shock and awe*” assault on Baghdad. People argued that the imagery was not accurate, because Saddam was a terrible dictator, a monstrous human being, and worse. Alas, complexity forces the realist to acknowledge that both realities are true. Saddam was a bad guy, and a murderer. But that did not mean that the people of Iraq did not have a semblance of normal life, of peace, before America launched its nighttime campaign of “*shock and awe*.”

The overwhelming fact, difficult to ignore, is that Iraq did not attack America on 9/11. The people of Iraq, whatever their hardships and pain under Saddam, did nothing to harm us. This dynamic mirrors the situation in the opening scenes of *Land of the Dead*, right down to the complexity and ambiguity. Yes, these are zombies ... flesh eaters. But these zombies have not harmed the society of Fiddler's Green.

And they are ruthlessly attacked, their land and riches pilfered.

As written elsewhere in this book a key concept of the horror films of the 2000s is “blowback,” the idea that generations of imperialist American foreign policy have created the very hostilities that resulted in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. *Land of the Dead* is a textbook “blowback” film. The zombies in their Americana small town are attacked and roused to action. Kaufman, Cholo and the others believed that they could simply attack these towns and take what they want, but the denizens had other ideas, and launched what is, in essence, an insurrection.

Again, insert a comparison to the Iraq War here.

Americans were not greeted as liberators in Baghdad like Vice-President Dick Cheney promised. After the initial victory, American forces had to continually battle dangerous insurgents. Subsequently, Iraq became an inescapable quagmire. In the film, Kaufman's plot to steal resources in the hands of the —to all visible evidence, peaceful—zombies results in the activation of a new enemy, and a clearly defined “blowback” situation

This author enjoys *Day of the Dead* as much as the next fan, but a clear side-by-side reading of the films reveals that *Land of the Dead*—for all its “mainstream”-ness—features a far more compelling, complex, and better-stated, even provocative social commentary, thus living up to the highest ideals of Romero's Dead series. The saga has taken on the Vietnam conflict and systemic racism (*Night of the Living Dead*), conspicuous consumption/consumerism (in *Dawn of the Dead*), and in this 2005 film challenges America of the War on Terror Age about imperialist foreign policy and systemic racism at home. Even the character of Kaufman, whom Hopper reportedly based on Secretary of Defense for the Bush Administration, Donald Rumsfeld, is an avatar for this viewpoint, at one point enunciating the Reagan/Bush line “*we don't negotiate with terrorists*.”

The terrorist, in this case, is Cholo, a man who served Kaufman, but who has been denied the privilege Kaufman enjoys.

The central setting of *Land of the Dead* is a skyscraper for the rich, and again, there's no way that a film featuring that setting, made in the year 2005, could be interpreted as anything but a reference to the Twin Towers, and the 9/11 attacks. This tower falls explicitly because of Kaufman's policies, because of blowback to those policies, just as our towers fell on that terrible day in response to American policies regarding the Middle East. That doesn't make either attack right. But it does make each attack, understandable, and that was not a nuance often heard in America in the 2000s.

Finally, the closing moments of *Land of the Dead* suggest, perhaps, Romero's ultimate overturning of social order, as imagined in his short story, *Anubis*, and carried often today on T-shirts and bumper stickers. The zombies, at the Green Bistro “*eat the rich*.” One might argue that Romero sees this “*eating*

of the rich,” as unavoidable in America if the elite doesn’t change its ways; if privilege, war for profit and systemic racism aren’t addressed or overturned.

Land of the Dead showcases Romero at his most provocative in terms of social commentary, doing at the height of the ultra-conservative Bush Administration precisely what he had done at the height of the Nixon Era, or at the fledgling start of the Reagan Revolution: challenging the status quo in America. Sure, there may be less “guts” on screen in a literal sense, but Romero clearly showcases “guts” in a different fashion. In an age when questioning the President of the United States’ policies meant that a large portion of the population would brand you “unpatriotic,” Romero was admirably consistent in his long-held philosophy, and thus a voice of courage in a repressive time.

You don’t have to agree with him to admire his guts, or the intelligence of this film.

His *Land* is our land.

Noroi: The Curse * * * 1/2

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jin Muraki (Musafumi Kobayashi); Rio Kanno (Kana Yano); Tomono Kuga (Junko Ishii); Marika Matsumoto (Self); Yoko Chosokabe (Kimiko Yano); Miyoko Hanai (Keiko Kobayashi); Makoto Inamori (Koichi Hirotsu); Satoru Jitsunashi (Mitsuo Hori).

CREW: Cathay-Keris Films, PMP Entertainment and Universe Laser & Video Co. Ltd. Present *Noroi: The Curse*. Director of Photography: Shozo Morishita. Film Editor: Nobuyuki Takahashi. Executive Producer: Takashige Ichise. Directed by: Koji Shiraishi M.P.A.A. Rating: NR. Running time: 116 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A video documentary deemed “*too disturbing for public viewing*” traces the last days of paranormal investigator Masafumi Kobayashi, who disappeared with an adopted boy following the burning down of his house and the death of his wife, Keiko. The documentary organizes footage from Kobashi involving a specific investigation involving a strange woman, Junko Ishii (Kuga), and her son. The documentary follows Kobayashi down a rabbit hole of the bizarre and disturbing, including illegal abortions, stolen fetuses, ancient rites, “*ectoplasmic worms*,” and a demon known as Kagatuba.

COMMENTARY: “*No matter how horrifying, I want the truth*,” the paranormal investigator, Kobayashi, declares in *Noroi: The Curse*, a well-constructed, and highly complex, indeed labyrinthian, though rewarding example of the found footage horror format. The film’s likeable investigator, in a clear example of the “*be careful what you wish for*,” paradigm, does get to the truth, eventually, and learning that truth costs him more than he could have ever imagined. The film, assembled from B-roll of TV footage, featuring talking-head confessionals and more, charts a slow-burn uncovering of the “truth,” and many disparate elements come together into a terrifying and alarming conclusion.

Even after twenty years, the standard bearer for found footage horror film remains *The Blair Witch Project*, but the 2000s brought many new and valuable twists on the format, including the harrowing, hyper-accelerated *REC* (2007), the Kaiju entry *Cloverfield* (2008), and the haunting *Lake Mungo* (2008). Popular entries in the format also include the mainstream *Paranormal Activity* (2009) and its sequels. One element that most of these found footage films share is a relatively short run-time. Some of these movies clock out at under ninety minutes. The short duration is a result of two things.

The first is the lack of a formal, third person-style film-grammar, which causes filmmakers to instead rely on a kind of “you are there” immediacy with rough scene breaks and the like. It is difficult to tell a coherent story from one unbroken point of view for an hour and half, with only “in camera” transitions to paper over scene changes.

Secondly, that kind of informality can grow tiring easily. To this day, the author encounters viewers who complain about *The Blair Witch Project*'s shaky camera. Had it run any longer, they complain, they would have been puking in the theater.

Noroi: The Curse bucks the convention of short running times with a duration of two hours. For some viewers, this will prove a stumbling block. The film does not move fast. For others, *Noroi* will be recognized, and deep appreciated, as something akin to a deep dive into a footage archive, in which nothing is exactly as it seems. Often, the important clues about the narrative are hidden in throwaway details. For those willing to take the effort, *Noroi* rewards them and builds an impressive tapestry out of breadcrumbs. For those who simply desire a harrowing experience more like *REC*, the film may not be to their tastes.

In other ways, *Noroi* feels like a traditional found footage film. Night vision is deployed as a technique, the horror centers around a myth or story (in this case a demon, Kagutaba), and the camera always remains on. And, of course, found footage films can prove grimmer than traditional, third person horror films because the hero or protagonist need not survive the drama. All that needs survive is, well, that discovered footage. All those elements of the sub-genre are here and used well.

Also, like *The Blair Witch Project*, *Noroi* gains much of its frightening energy from scenes lensed outdoors, and at night. An early scene in a graveyard provides one of the movie's creepiest moments, and the climactic revelation of a demonic altar (adorned with baby fetuses) is also terrifying. As man becomes more and more reliant on technology (like the ever-present video cameras seen in found footage movies), and better able to control his environment (air conditioning and the like), natural areas—the outdoors at midnight, for example, feel ever more uncontrolled, unpredictable, and even dangerous. There, in the dark, monstrous things still lurk.

Noroi shares some things in common with *Ringu* (1998), particularly the re-telling of a back-story that involves a remote location with some unusual feature (whether a volcano, or a submerged village), rituals unfamiliar to Americans, and the relationship between a parent and a possibly evil child. *Noroi* did not get the J-Horror remake that *Ringu* did, perhaps because of the complexity of its narrative, but found an audience in America in the late 2010s on streaming services. Before that time, it was something of a Holy Grail for fans of foreign horror, in part because the film works so assiduously to play as “real.” It features many of the stock elements of found footage, as noted above, but yet feels more real. *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* is another found footage film of labyrinthian plot and focus on the real, but some of the performances there transmit as artificial. Maybe it is the language barrier, but that flaw is not evident in *Noroi*. The film feels weird, authentic and disturbing. It's a long, slow, deep dive into a serious study of the supernatural, and one that leaves questions, and a lingering sense of unease.

Drilling down to the heart of the movie's theme, *Noroi* reminds the viewer, through its found footage nature, that man is always developing new technologies and new ways of knowing. Frighteningly, it also reminds us that no matter how great that technology is, we are connected to our past, and elemental terrors and dangers. “*The curse*” is that even with science, we sometimes can't escape our primitive beginnings and fears of the dark.

The Ring Two * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“...there's something almost wacky about the new scare scenes screenwriter Ehren Kruger has dreamed up for *Ring Two*. In one, evil deer descend from the forest and attack Rachel's car with the ferocity of demons. In another, Samara haunts a bathtub while Aidan bathes, and the water keeps jumping up and flooding the room to the bewilderment of Max. Smug psychiatrist Dr. Emma Temple (Elizabeth Perkins) is the object of some implausible hospital malice, and in the very first scene, a jerky high school boy who knows the tape is bad stuff tries to trick a gullible girl into watching it, with dire results. None of these scenes is very interesting or imaginative, and once we know what's going on, it's hard to be much involved in them. Even

the movie's best sequence, a climactic return to the spooky well from which Samara emerges to claim her victims, doesn't catch fire. If it's not exactly a case of going to the well once too often, it's still not enough to make us want to keep any more appointments with Samara.... Despite its drawbacks, there is one fascinating element to this movie: the presence of the original Japanese director, Nakata, who directed both *Ringu* and its Japanese sequel (completely different from this one). Nakata has a subtle, creepy style that sometimes brings *Ring Two* to fitful life."—Michael Wilmington, *Chicago Tribune*: "Bored of the 'Ring,' Naomi Watts performance one of the few highlights of this tepid horror flick," March 18, 2005, page 7A1.

"*The Ring Two* pales in comparison with the first film in the franchise for a number of reasons, but chief among them is the fact that there's little in the way of plot here. It takes an hour before things really get rolling, and the audience is wise to what Samara is up to far too long before the characters are. This movie pretty much abandons the cursed videotape and the urban legend of the first movie, making for a fairly standard haunting plot (what little of it there is). The mystery in this movie, as compared to the first, is far too simple and transparent."—Don MacPherson, *The Daily Gleaner*: "*The Ring Two* fails to frighten," March 21, 2005.

"Working from a screenplay by Ehren Kruger, Nakata takes a measured but mesmerizing approach. Although *The Ring Two* delivers the required jolts, it's even more impressive as an exercise in eeriness. Instead of merely pouring on the blood, Nakata orchestrates a scenario that truly gets under your skin."—Calvin Wilson, *St. Louis-Post Dispatch*: "Trim your nails before seeing *Ring Two*," March 15, 2005, page E1.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Naomi Watts (Rachel); Simon Baker (Max Rourke); David Dorfman (Aidan); Elizabeth Perkins (Dr. Emma Temple); Gary Cole (Martin); Sissy Spacek (Evelyn); Ryan Merriman (Jake); Emily VanCamp (Emily); Kelly Overton (Betsy); James Lesure (Doctor); Kelly Stables (Evil Samara).

CREW: Dreamworks, Benderspink and MacDonald/Parkes Productions present *The Ring Two*. Casting: Deborah Aquila, Tricia Wood. Production Designer: Jim Bissell. Costume Designer: Wendy Chuck. Special Effects: Rhythm and Hues, Hammerhead Productions, Digital Filmworks, Cinovation Studios. Music: Henning Lohner, Martin Tillman, Director of Photography: Gabriel Beristain. Film Editor: Michael N. Knue. Producers: Laurie MacDonald, Walter F. Parkes. Executive Producers: Roy Lee, Mike Macari, Neil Machlis, Michele Weisler. Based on the 1998 film from Hiroshi Takahashi and the novel by Koji Suzuki. Written by: Ehren Kruger. Directed by: Hideo Nakata. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 128 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Rachel (Watts) and her son, Aidan (Dorfman), have relocated to a quiet, out of the way town, but the vengeful spirit of Samara (Stables) soon finds them again. They realize that they made only one copy of her tape, but that since there are two of them, she can still reach them, and hurt them. Seeking a new mother, Samara begins to possess Aidan physically, Desperate to save her boy, Rachel must once again dig into Samara's life, and history, to determine a way to stop her.

COMMENTARY: A low-energy, long-winded sequel to one of the best horror films of the 2000s, *The Ring Two* lacks inspiration and a *raison d'être*, and yet, clearly, is not a slapdash sequel either. On the positive side of the equation, Naomi Watts and David Dorfman return to continue the story of Rachel and Aidan. On the negative side, the film can't really think of any new additions to canon and settles for a simple "possession" story using *The Ring's* protagonists.

Explained in horror movie terms, *The Ring Two* is the *Freddy's Revenge* of this franchise, only without the gay subtext. Basically, the original *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) was a brilliant, transgressive horror film that set up a new kind of paradigm, rubber-reality, and introduced a boogeyman who could stalk dreams, Freddy Krueger. The film sizzled with originality, and terror, not merely because of Robert Englund's performance and Freddy's abilities, but because of Heather Langenkamp's presence as Freddy's nemesis, Nancy. In *Freddy's Revenge*, however, it wasn't clear how the saga could continue, and the movie felt almost like a placeholder until the details of Freddy's power and universe could be ironed out. *The Ring Two* suffers from many of the same issues as *Freddy's Revenge*. Both films back away from the key horror iconography of their source material, and instead settle for a

“possession” story. Both Freddy and Samara, in their respective entries, wish to take physical form again, and pick a young male target to inhabit. This new, and far more conventional strategy, does not explicitly involve dreams (Freddy’s bailiwick) or the tape and an emergence from television (Samara’s shtick).

Here, it is determined that Samara merely wants a mother, which doesn’t exactly track with the original depiction of her. In the first film, Rachel and Aidan thought she wanted peace, and to be freed from her tomb in the well. It was discovered that she wasn’t planning to rest in peace, but to transmit her pain, forever. Here, that idea is rewritten, because she wants to become Rachel’s child. This feels more like a plotline from *Dark Water* than it does a continuation of *The Ring* that tracks with the first film.

By the same token, *The Ring Two* offers a few big set-pieces that can’t live up to the first film in the saga. The strangest, and silliest, involves a herd of deer attacking Rachel and Aidan in the car while they travel on a wooded road. This misconceived and ridiculous sequence is poorly executed and showcases poorly animated CGI deer trampling the vehicle. Apparently, the deer are controlled and sent by Samara. One can see why this scene exists. It’s a call-back, presumably, to the scene in the first film set on a ship at sea, as a horse breaks loose and goes crazy, because of proximity to Samara.

Even Samara’s resurrection isn’t particularly inspired. True, no dogs piss on her bones in an auto junkyard to desecrate her corpse (see: *Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master* [1988]), but the idea that Aidan and Rachel could be so careless as to not make two tape copies (since there are two of them) doesn’t ring true of their characters. If she is defined as a great mother, so much so that Samara wants her for herself, then Rachel’s oversight, which permits Aidan’s possession, is baffling.

Despite the conventional nature of this sequel, the silly deer sequence, and the contrivances to resurrect Samara, it is also fair to state that *The Ring Two* resurrects the first film’s oppressive, lugubrious mood and look to a great degree. The lead characters are again appealing, and the audience identifies with them. There’s even a very 2000s kind of subtext involving guilt. To escape Samara’s reach, Rachel and Aidan passed on the misery by copying her tape and making sure at least one other person saw it (and presumably died).

They have become, essentially, accomplices in murder.

This fact haunts them, as does Samara. “*We didn’t do anything wrong. We did what anyone else would do,*” Rachel and Aidan say, grappling with their culpability for Samara’s reign of terror. In short, they were afraid, and because of that fear, acted to protect themselves, without thinking of the well-being of others. This was the War of Terror paradigm writ large. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Americans were scared. Politicians of the age used the fear to wage a war against a country that had not attacked the United States, Iraq. The politicians sought (mostly false, and discredited) justification for the attack, but the fact was that Americans went for it, because of their fear about being attacked again. *The Ring Two* examines Aidan and Rachel’s culpability, and finds them guilty. They did do, likely, what anyone would have done, but they suffer for their participation in Samara’s reign of terror and must again confront her. Their actions, which hurt innocents, did not save them, only delayed another attack.

The Ring Two is not a terrible film, but it is a mediocre one, especially following up on the brilliance of the original film. This sequel feels uninspired and tired, and at over two hours at length, it induces a trance-like, sleepy vibe in the viewer. While watching, one can almost feel the horror movie conventions grinding away, with the opening death scene set-piece (what is this, *Scream?*), the desperate, Hail Mary, resurrection explanation, the new motivations for Samara, now just wanting a mum, and the ludicrous, horror set-pieces, like the deer attack on the car. The real tragedy of the film is that it is well-made for the most part, and well-acted, but that no one ever really thought of a good story that justified bringing Samara back out of the TV.

Saw II * * * 1/2

"Gleefully unpleasant, cheerfully absurd and over-the-top."—Philippa Hawker, *The Age*, April 9, 2006.

"...[I]f you can somehow get past the psychotic mind games and the uber-gore, *Saw II*, like its predecessor offers its share of surprises and a plotline far more sophisticated than typically found in slasher flicks."—Jack Garner, *Gannett News Service*, October 25, 2005, page 1.

"Again, I fell for the twist and ate it whole. By playing with time and characters' expectations, the sequel managed to throw three clever reveals and I saw none of them coming."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Tobin Bell (Jigsaw/John Kramer); Shawnee Smith (Amanda); Donnie Wahlberg (Detective Eric Matthews); Erik Knudsen (Daniel Matthews); Dina Meyer (Kerry); Franky G (Xavier); Glen Plummer (Jonas); Emmanuelle Vaugier (Addison); Beverley Mitchell (Laura); Timothy Burd (Obi); Lyriq Bent (Rigg); Noam Jenkins (Michael); Tony Nappo (Gus).

CREW: Lionsgate Films, Twisted Pictures, Evolution Entertainment, Got Films presents *Saw II*. Casting: Stephanie Gorin, Amy Lippens. Costume Designer: Alex Kavanaugh. Production Designer: David Hackl. Music: Charlie Clouser. Director of Photography: David A. Armstrong. Film Editor: Kevin Greutert. Producers: Mark Burg, Gregg Hoffman, Oren Koules. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Jason Constantine, Stacey Testro, James Wan, Leigh Whannell. Written by: Leigh Whannell and Darren Lynn Bousman. Directed by: Darren Lynn Bousman. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Corrupt detective Eric Matthews (Wahlberg) is horrified to learn that the Jigsaw Killer (Bell) has captured his teenage son, Daniel (Knudsen), and put him into one of his life-or-death games in a house at an unknown location, along with several other individuals. Knudsen and another detective, Kerry (Meyer), capture Jigsaw in his lair, and the mastermind claims that Eric will see his son again, "safe," if only Eric agrees to talk with him, seriously. Eric underestimates Jigsaw, however, and in keeping with his brutal nature, physically beats Kramer and forces him to take him to his son. Things don't turn out quite as he hoped they would.

COMMENTARY: Although it lacks the complex, Russian Doll-type, flashback-within-flashback-within-flashback narrative of the original *Saw*, *Saw II* is nonetheless a worthy follow-up to the first film in the franchise. This sequel stands tall as a character piece concerning a police detective who is a very, very bad man indeed, played by Donnie Wahlberg. *Saw II* plays as a tragedy, in some ways, as the lead character, Matthews, marches blindly and ignorantly to his doom despite Jigsaw's best efforts to help him avoid a terrible fate. In the 2000s, there are other examples of this quasi-film noir structure, including *Hellraiser: Inferno* (2000), wherein a police detective goes on a quest, but finds only, in the final analysis, his own inadequacies. *Saw II* makes the most of this idea.

Like *Saw* before it, *Saw II* manages effortlessly to surprise and shock, offering a triumphant return to the nine-dimensional chess play of Whannell's film. *Saw II*'s final moments, reveals in gut-crunching detail, how John Kramer, the Jigsaw Killer, has been an honest broker all along for Eric regarding the nature of his game and the safety of his son. But Eric is so cynical, so corrupt, so incapable of seeing honesty or openness in the people he sends to prison, that he stumbles, blindly to his gruesome fate (and a return to *Saw*'s icky bathroom setting, as well). This sequel works well because Eric is such a fallible and fragile character, locked into his routines of bad behavior, and he is actually someone worthy of Jigsaw's time. That isn't always the case, it feels like, in some later sequels.

Saw II also does a strong job of cementing the standards or conventions of the franchise. There's the creepy puppet, who is more ambulatory this time, and the micro-tape recorder featuring the rules of the game. There are the contests, of course, and *Saw II* features some of the most disgusting and memorable of the series. And then there's the person/assailant disguised as a pig, for a little added

nightmare fodder, the last act revelation (or often, reversal) and the consistent lighting scheme. All the *Saw* movies share this oversaturated, sickly green coloring, like the world itself is decaying and corrupt.

In terms of set-pieces, *Saw II* depicts a gruesome showstopper that nearly one-ups the first film's reverse bear trap. This one is called the Venus Fly Trap, and is an open helmet that, if not deactivated, will snap closed on the game-player's face, spikes and all. The unlucky contestant is Michael, who can escape if he only cuts a key out of the flesh behind his eyeball. He is not able to make that leap of disfigurement, and the Venus Fly Trap does its gruesome work.

But ultimately more damaging and traumatic to the psyche is another trap featured in the film, one in the house where Amanda and Daniel play their game with the others. This time, a necessary key to unlock a puzzle is buried in a pit of thousands of dirty, yellowed, used hypodermic needles. One of the contestants must get down in the pit, and using their bare hands, dig around to locate that key. Amanda gets tossed into the pit, filthy hypodermics jamming into her arms, legs and other areas of bare flesh as a result. Although not nearly as bloody as other contests in the film, this set-piece resonates in terms of sheer nastiness. The hypodermic pit is not easily forgotten, and of course, Amanda is an ex-addict. So, she is forced (despite her alliance with John) to reckon with her past, once more, to get to her future. This pit of needles is truly hellish in concept and execution, and in keeping with one of the film's great lines: "*Once you are in Hell, only the Devil can help you out.*"

Saw II gets a little diffuse as it hits the carnage candy rule of sequels, placing Daniel in a group of numerous ex-convicts (victims of his Dad), who all have to play a game. There are a few too many, undistinguished characters in the mix at the house, and since the audience doesn't get to know them well, their gruesome fates carry less psychic weight than one might hope.

Also, Eric is the real focus of this Jigsaw game, and this film, and time is better spent on his character, and his psychological foibles. Still, Eric is an especially appealing and timely character in the 2000s, a man who absolutely won't shift from his doomed course, no matter the facts or the evidence at hand. He is stuck on his track, able to view the world only from a narrow perception.

Some may note that this quality was George W. Bush's great flaw as a leader as well. He was determined to invade Iraq, despite the fact that it had not attacked America on 9/11. He pushed for that war because Saddam Hussein would not allow inspectors in his country to look for weapons of mass destruction. Yet Saddam Hussein did relent, and did let the UN inspectors in. Bush still invaded the country, not taking "yes" for an answer. Then, when the war went badly, W. kept doubling down on it, with the troop "surge," for instance. Like Eric in the film, America had a leader who was unable to read the facts in front of his face and make a decision that would have avoided a lot of bloodshed and loss. There is something Shakespearean and tragic about both Bush and Matthews, and the blinders they wear.

By the time of *Saw II*'s release, the franchise was still firing on all creative thrusters, producing a movie every year, but few of the sequels could equal the cleverness and ingenuity of the first film and this wholly worthwhile (if disgusting) follow-up.

The Skeleton Key * * *

Critical Commentary

"It's not a bad horror story, really. There are all the appropriate shocks and twists, abetted by fine editing and clever musical stings and sound effects. It's just that, after luring the audience into this weird experience, there's no way the filmmakers can resolve things to anyone's true satisfaction. Ever since *The Sixth Sense*, horror movies have been trying to come up with a refreshing twist ending and invariably they come up short."—John McKay, *Canadian Press News Wire*, November 5, 2005.

"*Skeleton Key* is a ludicrous, campy bit of deep-fried Southern gothic nonsense, except nobody involved in the movie seems to have figured that out. It's all played straight and solemn, which looks more and more ridiculous the sillier it gets. And silly it does get."—Matt Soergel, *Florida Times Union*: "No Bones about it:

"The genuinely surprising ending almost makes up for the so-so beginning."—Eric Andersson, *Us Weekly*, November 28, 2005, page 92.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kate Hudson (Caroline Ellis); Peter Sarsgaard (Luke Marshall); Gena Rowlands (Violet Devereaux); John Hurt (Ben Devereaux); Maxine Barnett (Mama Cynthia); Joy Brant (Jill); Fahnlohnee Harris (Hallie). Tona Staten (Audrey); Forrest Landis (Martin Thorpe); Jamie Lee Redmond (Grace Thorpe); Ronald McCall (Papa Justify); Jeryl Prescott Sales (Mama Cecile).

CREW: Universal Pictures, Shadow Catcher Entertainment, and Brick and Dust Productions present *The Skeleton Key*. Casting: Ronna Kress. Costume Designer: Louise Frogley. Production Designer: John Beard. Director of Photography: Dan Mindel. Music: Edward Shearmer. Film Editor: Joe Hutsching. Producers: Daniel Bobker, Michael Shamberg, Stacey Sher, Iain Softley. Executive Producer: Clayton Townsend. Written by: Ehren Kruger. Directed by: Iain Softley. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young nursing student, Caroline (Hudson) quits her job at a hospital and interviews for a job as a hospice nurse at an old plantation in Terrebone Parish, Louisiana. There, Caroline would care for the comatose old man, Ben Devereaux (Hurt), and report to the elderly man's wife, a rigid and draconian Southern woman, Violet (Rowlands). After being encouraged to take the job by the Devereaux attorney, Luke (Saarsgard), Caroline moves into the plantation and begins to experience strange things as she goes about her tasks. She utilizes a skeleton key—which opens every locked door on the estate—to find a room in the attic that is filled with items from voodoo rituals. As she learns about the history of the plantation, Caroline comes to suspect that the plantation's past is still alive and manipulating the present.

COMMENTARY: In this taut and intriguing Southern Gothic, a young nurse, and avatar for the 2000s, Caroline (Kate Hudson), crosses over the threshold to the supernatural (typically, a Last Chance Gas Station), and confronts the past, or in this case, a region's (the Deep South's) entrenched racism. At least that is one way of reading *The Skeleton Key*, a film about voodoo, and an African American couple's revenge on the whites who mistreated them, and their people for generations.

On the surface, *The Skeleton Key* is a handsomely mounted, mainstream horror film with a top-notch Hollywood cast. It's a "young woman in peril" movie that finds Caroline imperiled by a dark secret at a plantation haunted by America's ignoble past, and the evil of slavery. There is no doubt that Hudson's character, Caroline, is the protagonist, as she seeks to solve the strange mystery of her new home. Watching the film, one might even conclude that the film is xenophobic and racist. In other words, it's about a Caucasian woman menaced by "the other," a belief system outside of traditional Christianity, in this case, voodoo. If read that way, the film would certainly be a 2000s variant on *The Possession of Joel Delaney* (1972), a film which sought to locate terror in the xenophobic nature of a culture outside white American boundaries.

A different reading, however, is preferable (and it tracks better, too) in terms of *The Skeleton Key*. Here, two slaves in the antebellum South have managed to outfox their white "masters" and indeed, mortality itself. They have taken over the bodies of the plantation's new owners, and continue to do so, periodically. This is a trade-off which they intend for Luke and Caroline too. They will "steal" the rest of their years, depositing these white Americans in the used up, elderly bodies they currently inhabit (Ben and Violet). In this way, they not only cheat death, they have the last laugh against their former "owners," who cherished wealth, status and privilege above all else. Now, the two ex-slaves, Papa Justify and Mama Cynthia, inherit all those things, by inhabiting Caucasians. So, the film, ironically, is a comment on slavery, the old South, and the fact that the old sins of America have still not been reckoned with, nor made right.

Caroline and Luke are both innocent, and yet simultaneously the recipients of privilege based on their skin color. It is true, neither Caroline nor Luke participated in slavery, not having been born yet. But this is the argument, indeed, and politics, of reparations. Even though they were not alive during the period of slavery and the Civil War, they have received the “invisible” benefits of it: inherited wealth, social status, privilege and so forth. So, while Caroline is a likeable protagonist and does not deserve, herself, the fate she receives, the film utilizes an old horror trope involving the sins of the father being passed to the child. Caroline and Luke are made to pay for the sins of their ancestors, and a white America that, even today, chooses to view the moral atrocity of slavery as “*a necessary evil*,” in the words of Republican Senator Tom Cotton in 2020. Caroline loses her societal standing, and her own body and mind, in payment for the sins of the South, and of America, in propagating slavery for so long, to the point of having senators defend it as an institution as late as 2020.

Given this reading, the film operates on two fascinating tracks. The main narrative involves a likeable young woman who is attacked and then possessed by the spirits of two wronged Black, ex-slaves. They are “the monsters” trying to hurt her, at least on this surface level. But the sub-text is all about America’s failure to acknowledge, and indeed make right, one of the most horrible chapters in its history. Cynthia and Justify don’t have to “justify” what they take. They, and all slaves like them, also saw their remaining years stolen, in a very real sense, by the Old South, and the white people who benefited from their blood, sweat and tears. *The Skeleton Key* is about skeletons in America’s closet, and the fact that even today, the legacy or ghosts of the past are not buried.

Consider an important line of dialogue late in the film. “*Maybe all houses have spirits, but we can’t see them until we believe in them.*”

Indeed, perhaps all countries have ghosts, or spirits too, but until we face them, we don’t believe in them.

The Skeleton Key, in its own way, acknowledges that America is going to remain haunted, and, indeed, un-exorcised, so long as people don’t look at the past and address how the wrongs of our beginnings still impact people living today. Again, Caroline is not a bad person, and doesn’t deserve to die, or suffer eternal slavery of her body under Cynthia’s control. However, those who were enslaved systemically in America, from its founding to the Civil War, didn’t deserve their enslavement either. As long as the old evil goes unaddressed, this film suggest, new evils will result from it. Caroline’s mantra in the film is that the dark forces can’t hurt her if she doesn’t believe in them, and that fits with this reading of the film.

If we fail to see how our ancestors’ actions impact the present day, we are willfully closing our eyes to the ghosts haunting our country. Or, as Caroline notes when she awakens. “*It’s real. It’s all real!*” In such a weird, sub-textual way, *The Skeleton Key* proves itself more than a bland PG-13 horror film and star vehicle for Kate Hudson. There is something powerful and unusual beating at the heart of this movie that speaks to ghosts in the culture, not just supernatural ghosts in a horror film.

Indeed, Caroline goes into a room that is described in the film as “*being locked since 1962*,” which, not coincidentally is the era of the Civil Rights movement. This seems a reminder that the age of Civil Rights reform has been eclipsed (by the Reagan Revolution, by the Bush Years), and locked away, forgotten.

Even though the outcome is bad for its protagonist, *The Skeleton Key* concerns a discussion that America needs to have in the 21st century, a conversation that hasn’t been seriously broached for a long time. How one chooses to read the film, is of course, up to the individual viewer. One can see it as an ethnocentric, bland product of mainstream Hollywood thinking. Yet *The Skeleton Key* opens up to new analyses and relevance if read in terms of the history of the American South and the skeletons in the closet we have yet to acknowledge fully.

2001 Maniacs (DTV) * * 1/2

Cast & Crew

CAST: Robert Englund (Mayor Buckman); Lin Shaye (Granny Boone); Giuseppe Andrews (Harper Alexander); Jay Gillespie (Anderson Lee); Marla Leigh Malcolm (Joey); Eli Roth (Justin); Dylan Edrington (Nelson); Matthew Carey (Cory); Peter Stormare (Professor Ackerman); Gina Marie Heekin (Kat); Brian Gross (Ricky); Mushond Lee (Malcolm); Bianca Smith (Leah); Brendan McCarthy (Rufus); Adam Robitel (Lester); Christa Campbell (Milk Maiden); Wendy Kremer (Peaches); Cristin Michele (Glendora); Kodi Kitchen (Hester); Ryan Fleming (Hucklebilly); Craig Stark (Sheriff); Travis Tritt (Gas Station Attendant); Hugh Casey (Reverend).

CREW: Lionsgate Films, Blood Works, Raw Nerve, and Velvet Steamroller Entertainment present *2001 Maniacs*. Casting: Aaron Griffith. Costume Designer: Wendy Moynihan. Special Effects: S.O.T.A. FX. Music: Nathan Barr. Director of Photography: Steve Adcock. Film Editor: Michael Ross. Producers: Eli Roth, Scott Spiegel, Christopher Tuffin, Boaz Yakin. Executive Producer: Jonathan Bross. Written by: Chris Kobin and Tim Sullivan. Directed by: Tim Sullivan. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Three randy party boys blow off their history term papers in college to head to Daytona Beach for Spring Break. They take a wrong turn into Pleasant Valley, a town straight out of the Confederacy that is celebrating its “Guts and Glory” Jubilee. They are joined by other outsiders who have wandered off the main roads into town as well. Although the locals, led by Mayor Buckman (Englund), appear hospitable at first blush, they soon turn murderous, dividing and conquering their visitors in bloody, murderous fashion. A few survivors flee town only to learn the historical truth about Pleasant Valley.

COMMENTARY: The 2000s, the era of the blue state/red state divide, was a perfect time to remake Herschell Gordon Lewis’s 1964 film *Two Thousand Maniacs*. That horror film featured Yankee travelers running afoul of Confederate murderers who turned out to be vengeful ghosts. The film captured the idea of regional conflicts and wounds that, even after a hundred years, just wouldn’t go away, and, finally, can’t be buried. In the 2000s, these divisions in the American psyche were even more apparent. In 2008 Presidential candidate John Edwards spoke of there being “*two Americas*,” and he was referring largely to the divide between the rich and the poor, but he could have been talking about the multi-cultural blue states and their opposite, the Bible-Belt red states.

2001 Maniacs opens with archival footage of the Civil War. And in a college history classroom, students listen as the teacher discusses the hundreds of thousands of Americans who died fighting in the war. Special note is paid to General Sherman’s brutality on his march through the South. These somber points are ignored by bad students, party boy assholes, who can only think about getting to Spring Break. The idea forming here seems to be that if history is forgotten, it is doomed to be repeated. The blood of American ancestors means nothing to these modern college students. The Civil War and its atrocities might as well have occurred on a different planet.

The Southern denizens of Pleasant Valley, who are really ghosts, are mostly Southern stereotypes. They are racist. They have sex with farm animals. They speak in euphemisms that conform to the surface value of “southern hospitality.” But they are actually wronged people; murdered by the Union Army and now existing as vengeful ghosts. Here, it is more difficult to pick out *2001 Maniacs*’ real point. The audience is meant to feel sympathy for those civilians who were killed in what was, no doubt, a war crime. Yet those same citizens are depicted as backward, ignorant, monstrous people. As a character notes to another, “we’re in *Deliverance* country now.”

Basically, there’s nobody to root for or invest in here. The modern people, especially the bad students, are not smart, knowledgeable or likeable. They don’t deserve to be butchered for being shallow and ignorant, but nor are they, exactly, heroic. And the Southern Ghosts, though they suffered a terrible wrong, are no more likeable either. And that means this film is one of those “*Whoever wins, we lose*” films so often seen in the 2000s. Basically, as *South Park* would note, the choice is between a “douche bag” and a “turd sandwich.”

Pick your poison.

Despite the shallow unlikeable nature of virtually every character in the film, there is something oddly watchable about this movie. The murders are brutal and inventive, for example. One character is asked to drink some moonshine, for example, but it turns out to be acid. The character's innards then melt. Another character sees her body ripped apart in a stable, torn limb from limb. One other unlucky soul gets a heavy bell dropped on her, and one of the Southerners notes that she "*had a lot of guts*." It's disgusting, and campy, and but again, oddly compelling and well-made.

The characters here are not smart. For example, the survivors of the town attack stupidly split up almost immediately after deciding they will have each other's backs, no matter what. Naturally, they get picked off. Similarly, the movie talks out of both sides of its mouth by asking the audience to both root for the college kids and other visitors, and the Southerners, who—let's face it—are portrayed as little more than backcountry hicks. Yet *2001 Maniacs*'s "*a pox on both their houses*" approach, while not especially useful in creating sympathetic characters, certainly is relevant to the era. It pokes the hornet's nest of issues in America that, frankly, have not been resolved since the Civil War. One of the galvanizing issues of the 2000 Republican primary election for president, for instance, involved whether or not South Carolina's government should fly the Confederate flag on state property. Some people felt it was a monument to hate. And others felt, it was all about "heritage." And heritage gets its voice in the film. "*You don't want us thinking you're insulting our heritage, do you?*" a character warns one of the spring breakers.

2001 Maniacs may not have much to say in terms of resolving the gaping blue state/red state divide, but it campily and cheekily adds gasoline to the fire, anyway. It's an oddly relevant film for its era, just for daring to note that there are some wounds in American history, it seems, that will never be healed.

Urban Legends: Bloody Mary (DTV) * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kate Mara (Samantha Owens); Robert Vito (David Owens); Tina Lifford (Grace Taylor); Ed Marino (Bill Owens); Michel Coe (Buck Jacoby); Lillith Fields ("Bloody Mary"); Nancy Everhard (Pam Owens); Audra Lea Keener (Heather Thompson); Don Shanks (Coach Jacoby); Jeff Olson (Sheriff McKenna); Nate Herd (Tom Higgins); Brandon Sacks (Roger Dalton); Hailey Evans (Martha); Olesya Rulin (Mindy).

CREW: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, NPP Productions Inc., and Screen Gems present *Urban Legends: Bloody Mary*. Casting: Felicia Fasano, Jeff Johnson. Production Designer: Chris DeMuri. Costume Designer: Amy Jean Roberts. Special Effects: Sota Effects. Music: Scooter Pietsch, Jeff Rona. Director of Photography: Ian Fox. Film Editor: Michelle Harrison. Producers: Aaron Merrell, Scott Messer, Louise Phillips. Executive Producer: Matt Bierman. Written by: Michael Dougherty and Dan Harris. Directed by: Mary Lambert. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1969, a girl named Mary Banner is murdered the night of her prom by jocks. They hide her body, and the corpse is never discovered. In 2005, however, a young woman named Samantha (Mara) and her friends tell stories of Bloody Mary, and other urban legends. They soon become enmeshed in the case of Mary Banner, from all those years ago, when the ghost of Mary appears.

COMMENTARY: The third and final *Urban Legends* film eschews the slasher conventions that dominated the first two films in the franchise, and lurches straight into the supernatural. In this case, the concept of bloody Mary, a ghost who can be summoned by calling her name while facing the mirror, is tied to a local disappearance in the film's Salt Lake City location. The other urban legends utilized in the

film involve urinating into an electrified fence, a vending machine that falls over and crushes somebody, and the “people can lick too” killer-under-the-bed story that *Final Cut* also utilized. Although a reference is made to the first *Urban Legends* film and the murders at Pendleton College, this is mostly a stand-alone movie that features a wronged woman’s revenge from beyond the grave.

Given the specific content matter, this is yet another “men behaving badly” film of the 2000s that uses the supernatural as a mechanism by which the wronged, and usually dead victims of a sex crime, can get some form of justice from their accusers. In the case of *Urban Legends: Bloody Mary*, Bill Owens is the predator who is finally forced to reckon with his crimes, and in the film’s denouement Mary takes him back to the grave with her. In some ways, the supernatural, the name Mary, the central setting of the prom and other touches may remind viewers of *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night 2* (1987), another ghost story featuring similar settings, themes and characters.

Mary Lambert, who directed *Pet Semetary* (1989) and *Pet Semetary 2* (1991), may not bring her “A” game to this low rent, direct-to-video sequel, and the film doesn’t legitimately feel like part of the *Urban Legends* series, but it is not without value. Some of the death scenes are downright grotesque, particularly one involving a tanning salon, and Kate Mara is a solid protagonist who projects intelligence, even when the script does not. The story, about a crime in the past also gets into PTSD and other topics, as those who have lived with the crime in 1969 suffer from knowledge of it. One person apparently committed suicide, and another, a fortune teller, was biding her time to come back into the spotlight and reveal what she knows. Implicated in the crime along with the jocks are the high school football coach, and the town mayor, and so what the film is really about is a conspiracy of silence amongst a town’s authority figures. Again, in the “woke” era of #MeToo, these touches some especially powerful and prophetic.

Given its serious topics, and also the drugging of Samantha by a group of jocks with Rohypnol, it may be no surprise to report that *Urban Legends 3: Bloody Mary* takes its material pretty seriously.

At least until Tom Higgins urinates into a high voltage fence and blows his penis off.

White Noise ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“...does a good job making the most of our primal fears and intellectual curiosity, but doesn’t always follow through, getting lost in silly special effects and paranormal mumbo-jumbo.”—Katherine Monk, *CanWest News*: “Michael Keaton stars in often tense and eerie horror thriller,” January 6, 2005, page 1.

“The movie is a compendium of white upper-middle-class suburban banality, cheap scares and eye-crossingly monotonous drama.”—Phoebe Flowers, *South Florida Sun*: “*White Noise*: A Mere Ghost of the Old Michael Keaton,” January 7, 2005, page 6.

“...so full of plot holes and bad scripting that it will simply annoy most viewers.”—Richard J. Leskosky, *News Gazette*: “Plot holes, bad script make *White Noise* just annoying,” January 13, 2005, page T-15.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Michael Keaton (Jonathan Rivers); Chandra West (Anna Rivers); Deborah Kara Unger (Sarah Tate); Ian McNeice (Raymond Price); Sarah Strange (Jane); Nicholas Ella (Mike Rivers); Mike Dopud (Det. Smits); Marsha Regis (Police Woman); Brad Shivon (Minister); Mitchell Kosterman (Work Man); L. Harvey Gold (Business Man); Amber Rothwell (Susie Tomlinson); Suzanne Ristic (Mary Freeman); Keegan Connor Tracy (Mirabelle); Aaron Douglas (Young Father); Bruce Dawson (Mark).

CREW: Universal Pictures, Gold Circle Films, Bright-light Pictures, in association with Endgame Entertainment, Corus and The Movie Network presents *White Noise*. Casting: Maureen Webb. Costume Designer: Karen Matthews. Production Designer: Michael S. Bolton. Music: Claude Foisy. Director of Photography: Chris Seager. Film Editor: Nick Arthurs. Producers: Paul Brooks, Shawn Williamson. Executive Producers: Simon Brooks, Stephen Hegyes, Scott Niemeyer, Norm Waitt. Written by: Niall Johnson. Directed

SYNOPSIS: An architect, Jonathan Rivers (Keaton), grieves the tragic death of his wife, Anna (West), and is approached by a man, Raymond Price (McNeice), who claims to be in contact with her spirit. Price uses electronic voice phenomenon or EVP to communicate with the dead, a technique which involves listening to and watching empty channels on the television and simultaneously recording them. After hearing a message from Anna, Jonathan grows obsessed. He sets up a studio in his home to intercept additional signals. These messages encourage him to meddle in matters of life and death and seem to come from three mysterious apparitions.

COMMENTARY: The PG-13 *White Noise* returns to a common theme of its decade: technology as a portal or gateway through which evil forces may enter the mortal coil. In the 2000s, this idea is often replayed with different modern technologies, including Internet websites (*Feardotcom*), videotapes (*The Ring*), cell phones (*Pulse*, *One Missed Call*), and video games (*Stay Alive*, *Hellworld*). In *White Noise*, ghosts “bleed” into our world through the static on TV, and their messages are recorded on VCRs.

Although this theme is familiar, *White Noise* charts the theme in a new way, and one that is visually imaginative. In particular, many of the film’s images determinedly involve barriers of both clarity and opacity. In particular, there are many shots of windows, screens, and water featured in the film. All of these objects are meant to suggest separate worlds of reality, the walls that prevent crossing from one domain to the other. This concept mirrors the theme, about the world of the dead and the world of the living seeping into one another.

The film’s protagonist, Rivers (a name that, again, suggests an opaque barrier through which one can see; water), changes his entire life after his wife dies. In the movie’s opening scenes, he and his family live in an open, sunny, welcoming home. After her death, Rivers and his son relocate to a modern apartment that is dominated by a window. Inside, there are walls consisting of small opaque square panes that one cannot see fully through. These panes, like the ubiquitous static on EVP TV monitors, allow for one to see something on the other side, but only in indistinct, amorphous fashion.

In Rivers’ apartment dominated by windows of varying transparency, the windowpane represents the barrier of “death” that walls the worlds off from one another and keeps ghosts out of our reality. This leitmotif first becomes clear during a rainstorm. It is dry inside the apartment, even as outside, the water pounds the landscape. In another memorable composition, a figure moves up on an elevator in the exterior background, beyond Jonathan’s apartment, and the figure eerily resembles his dead wife. She is nearby, but unable to touch him, separated by a glass barrier, as the lovers are separated by their presence in connected, but separate worlds.

When Jonathan’s friend Sarah attempts suicide, again, the idea is one of transparent barriers being broken, joining the worlds. She falls from her apartment window, onto a glass roof below. The glass cracks as she hits it, suggesting that the barrier to the world of the dead has been impacted, but not yet breached. And, she miraculously survives. She stays on “this” side of the window, on this side of the supernatural world. But the barrier is splintered.

When Jonathan has meddled too often, when he has penetrated the walls between worlds once too much, he returns to his apartment to find that the barriers have fallen. His apartment has been ransacked and the windows are shattered. The barriers between the worlds are gone, and he is now exposed to a terrible danger from the other world. In trying to reach across dimensions, he has brought the walls down, and evil has entered our reality.

Beyond the ubiquitous windowpanes showcasing two worlds and the barrier between, *White Noise* is dominated by images of television sets casting their luminescent glare upon the world. The idea, once again, is of a barrier that the beings on “the other side” can’t cross until a bridge is constructed between the universes. Jonathan’s meddling in the affairs of the doomed is that very bridge. But, maintaining an air of mystery, the trio of evil ghosts is never given identifiable or recognizable human visages. Instead,

this ominous triumvirate appears in static on TV sets until it crosses over into our world. And then, finally, the threesome appears behind an opaque glass partition in that modern apartment, a final reminder to Jonathan and the audience that the mysteries of death, even if nearby, are never completely transparent.

The scary core conceit of the film, that it is dangerous to cross the barriers separating the living from the death may remind one of *Don't Look Now* (1973), another film in which a grieving family man goes in search of knowledge about life beyond death, plunging towards his own doom in the process. In *White Noise*, the warnings for Rivers not to cross the boundaries are literal. The film features many shots of signs that read warnings such as “Keep Out,” or “this gate must be kept locked at all times.” These real-world signs suggest both the proximity and danger of the supernatural world.

Beyond the film's art design, dominated by windows opaque and clear, *White Noise* suggests how technology can be addicting, or all-consuming. At a time when his son is grieving, Rivers leaves him to his own devices, literally ... as he tends to his devices: TV monitors and VCRs. Rivers just sits at his desk, in his chair, trying to determine meaning in a sea of static imagery, playing and replaying it incessantly (think: *Kairo*). Rivers is so concerned with contacting the other world, that he forgets his connections in the mortal world. His son asks him if he is okay, and it hardly registers.

The film's heartbreaking coda sees Rivers apologizing from beyond the grave to the son he ignored on the mortal coil. From the other side, he tells him “I'm sorry.” This is an acknowledgment that he made the wrong choice in life, to focus on his technology (and the portal to another world it promised to open), rather than focusing on family, the very thing that can make human life meaningful.

Although it is PG-13, *White Noise* is unsettling, and it refuses to spoon-feed its audience answers to all the film's questions. For example, the film never explains who the three dark figures on the screen are. They are sinister apparitions working a dark plan to impact the world of the living. But the shape of that plan is as opaque as the mysterious silhouettes in the static. *White Noise* smartly keeps this terror opaque, and not fully understood, so that ambiguity and uncertainty are fostered.

White Noise did not earn positive reviews on its release by mainstream critics, and horror fans were not exactly thrilled to see another PG-13 horror, either. Both camps, seeing through opaque windowpanes of their own, failed to discern the craftsmanship and intelligence of this meaningful and superb horror film. *White Noise* rises above many other films of the decade of the 2000s because it knowingly mirrors its content or theme (the barriers between world) with careful visuals that reflect that meaning.

Wolf Creek ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“...a worst-case-scenario white-knuckler executed with terrifically focused skill and realism.”—Dennis Harvey, *Variety*, February 7–February 13, 2006, page 70.

“...there is a genuine sense of dread.”—Geoffrey Macnab, *Sight and Sound*, November 2005, page 84.

“...by turns hair-raising and bile producing.”—Jessica Reaves, *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, December 23, 2005, page 1.

Cast & Crew

CAST: John Jarratt (Mick Taylor); Cassandra Magrath (Liz Hunter); Kestie Morassi (Kristy Earl); Nathan Phillips (Ben Mitchell); Gordon Poole (Old Man); Guy O'Donnell (Car Salesman); Phil Stevenson (Mechanic); Geoff Revell (Gas Station Attendant).

CREW: The Australian Film Finance Corporation presents in association with 403 Productions and the True Crime Channel, *Wolf Creek*. Casting: Angela Heesom. Production Designer: Robert Webb. Costume Designer: Nicola Dunn. Music: Francois Tetaz. Director of Photography: Will Gibson. Film Editor: Jason Ballantine. Producers: David Lightfoot, Greg McLean. Executive Producers: George Adams, Matin Fabinyi, Michael Gudinski, Gary Hamilton, Simon Hewitt. Written and Directed by: Greg McLean. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Three young people—Liz (Magrath), Kristy (Morassi) and Ben (Phillips)—take a road trip together in Australia. They take their beat-up car to the Great Northern Highway and visit the isolated Wolf Creek National Park. When ready to leave, however, the trio makes the unfortunate discovery that the car won't start. Seemingly from nowhere, a helpful local, Mick Taylor (Jarratt), appears and offers to take them back to his place, to repair the car. They reluctantly agree, but soon realize they have made a terrible mistake. Taylor is a sociopath and serial killer, and he sets out to maim and torture each of the unwitting would-be victims.

COMMENTARY: Greg McLean's controversial *Wolf Creek* is a road trip horror with a smattering of the “torture porn” aesthetic. Like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake, *Wrong Turn* and *The Hills Have Eyes* remake, the film follows all the aspects of the road trip horror movie format, in this case, turning the “wrong turn” nomenclature of a detour into horror into a simple fork in the road. Travel one way, and safety awaits. Take the other way at that crossroad, and terror and torture are around the corner. Although many critics dismissed and reviled *Wolf Creek* for its violence, the film actually comes as close to the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*'s “no learning” paradigm as any horror movie made since. In aping Tobe Hooper's structure, the film becomes, in turns, uncomfortable, and upsetting, and finally dread inducing.

Fostering predictability and familiarity at first, however, is *Wolf Creek*'s “road trip terror” formula. As in other films of this type, there is the Last Chance Gas Station (The borderlands between civilization and savagery; a threshold the protagonists must cross), a Lost and Found/Room of Belongings from previous victims, and the failure of technology in the wild (The car won't start, because it has been sabotaged by the killer). Like the long-lived Slasher Paradigm, the Road Trip Terror Paradigm in the 2000s is a point of recognition and entry for audiences. They recognize the format, but the playing out of the format, and the tropes, can be inventive within the expected framework.

That is precisely what occurs in *Wolf Creek*. In particular, director McLean seems to have internalized, deeply, the impact of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Tobe Hooper and Kim Henkel's

masterpiece opened with an onscreen card suggesting that the events depicted in the movie are real, even down to the intonations of a solemn-voiced narrator (John Larroquette). *Wolf Creek* dispenses with the narrator but opens with a card that notes the film is based on “actual events” and that “30,000 people are reported missing in Australia every year.” The last line is the kicker that reveals the bogus nature of the claim: “90% are found within a month. Some are never seen again.” So, really, 30,000 people don’t go, or at least stay missing Down Under a year. But still, the card absolutely sets the tone. This is real. Just like (the equally fake) *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Hooper and Henkel’s film also mastered the “no learning” idea in the horror film format. As noted in the review for *High Tension*, Alfred Hitchcock started down this road in *Psycho*. There, he killed the film’s lead, played by Janet Leigh, early in the proceedings, leaving the audience rudderless and uncomfortable. All of Marion Crane’s learning and experience was for naught. Her sister, her boyfriend, and a detective, Arbogast, had to start everything from the beginning ... again. But *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* injected the idea of “no learning” with steroids. Each of the teenagers in the Hooper film wandered aimlessly into the cannibal farmhouse and got brutally murdered each without learning what had happened to their friends, and each without being able to report back to their surviving buddies what was going on. The film took on a nightmarish, surreal, repetitive quality, as characters came to the dead-end house, and all forward plot development stopped. Because all learning stopped, there was never an explanation for Leatherface and his clan, a background story, or really any closure, either. Instead, the film was a descent into utter madness, and the final shots, with Leatherface twirling around with the chainsaw, by dusk, was a visual representation of that madness. The world, like Leatherface, would spin along madly, but there was no reason, no sense, behind it.

Thirty years later, *Wolf Creek* adopts an inventive spin on the no-learning paradigm. The film begins with Kristy, Liz and Ben getting to know each other, and there are intimations of attraction and romance in the triangle. They plan a three-week car trip together and are sent off with a party and a cake, with the legend “Happy Travels” written on it in icing. The film asks the audience to engage in the trio’s growth as a unit, as sexual attraction and other factors threaten to roil it. Ben uses a video camera, recording every aspect of the trip, so the audience is encouraged to view the movie as a chronicle of this happy travel. The camera records the frissons and joys of the trio, encouraging the audience to see Ben, Liz and Kristy as a unit.

In the last act, this approach is undone, or reversed. Mick captures the group and separates them. The film becomes, instead of a chronicle of the threesome, a mini anthology of separation and isolation as each protagonist, alone, confronts the killer and attempts to escape from him. Because Kristy, Liz and Ben are separated from one another, their joined story becomes three separate stories, and the idea of no learning comes into play as Mick hunts each of them, kills or attacks each of them, and there is no help for them. The protagonists make separate discoveries about Mick, make separate escape attempts, and experience separate fates. What was once a story of twentysomething bonding and romance, instead, becomes an exploration of the idea of mortality and how, in the end, every person dies alone.

No doubt readers are tired of reading this, but again, this idea mirrors the trauma of 9/11. Sure, this is an Australian film, but America launched a global War on Terror that impacted many countries across the world. The core idea of 9/11 was that nearly 3,000 Americans woke up that morning planning their lives—“happy travels,” road trips, love affairs—only to encounter the proverbial “fork in the road,” and life-ending event that they had to face, utterly alone. As events unfolded quickly around people who worked in the towers, they had no idea what was happening, and all the carefully built national illusions about peace and prosperity, security and technology were shattered. Frightened people were left to face their fates suddenly, and individually.

Wolf Creek’s first act, with the three twenty-somethings acting goofy and silly, has been criticized in some reviews, but it is an essential part of the film’s success. This is life before the fork in the road. We believe we have all the time in the world. We believe we will fall in love, fight, make-up, go on trips, and do other things.

Then the fork of the road comes, a path is selected, and the positive future vanishes. It goes away. Liz, Kristy and Ben believe they are all intertwined in a story, but once horror comes, they face their

tates alone, separated, and there is not even learning to go from one future to the other.

This film is so terrifying, and indeed, upsetting, because its approach so clearly mirrors human life; the idea of each of us encountering a fork in the road that changes everything, and being forced, finally, to contend with “fate” on our own, individually. *Wolf Creek* was heavily criticized, by the likes of the late Roger Ebert, for example, because of its violence. Some critics walked out of screenings of the film. There is no doubt that the violence in the last act of the film is grueling and upsetting, though, again, in the tradition of Hooper, McLean intimates more than he shows. The “Head on a Stick” scene is so terrifying not because it is bloody and violent, *because it is about losing control of our lives*. Mick severs the spine, basically, so that his victims can still think, still witness what is being done to them, but can’t physically respond or fight back.

Again, this is a bit of a metaphor for human life in general, isn’t it?

We’re all, when it comes down to it, Heads on Sticks. When we get a cancer diagnosis, our bodies fail us, but we still have to endure it. When people are on a plane, or train that is about to crash, their bodies fail them—there is nowhere to run, and no protection—but their brains still register the terror of what is happening to them.

In short, there is a thematic reason for the “*head on a stick*” torture aspects of the film if one connects all the dots presented by *Wolf Creek*. Like so many other road trip terror movies, *Wolf Creek* is about the way we live, the forks in the road we cross, and finally, about the way we must reckon with our inescapable, solitary fates.

It’s not happy.

It’s easier to live in an illusion of safety and security than reckon with the idea that we are mortal, and limited, and all bound to die. But the great thing about horror movies is, of course, that they reflect our times, and our lives. Their obligation is to scare us, not reinforce delusion. Their obligation is to scare us with the unpleasant truths of human existence, not build up illusions around it. Yes, *Wolf Creek* is upsetting. In the 2000s, in the post-9/11 age, it is a reflection of its time. The point, perhaps, is that McLean has made an artful film here, one that mirrors its time, but also takes the no learning paradigm of the horror genre pioneered by Hitchcock, and developed by Hooper, to a new and relevant place.

That *Wolf Creek* is a beautiful picture, shot on location with picturesque visuals, only makes the film all the more powerful. Those who look at the film and say that “*there’s nothing out here*,” (like our protagonists at Wolf Creek National Park) are missing the obvious. The film is a terrifying reflection of human existence, and mortality. We think we’re going out on “*happy travels*,” but there’s always the danger of that fork in the road, or a crater in the ground, to send us in another, far less pleasant direction.

LEGACY: A sequel, *Wolf Creek 2*, was released in 2013. A short-lived TV series follow-up was produced in 2016.

TIMELINE: 2006

January 3: Jack Abramoff, a Washington lobbyist, pleads guilty to conspiracy, tax evasion, and mail fraud.

February 11: Vice President Cheney shoots 78-year-old lawyer Harry Whittington in the face while hunting in Texas. He did not face charges for the apparent accident. Three days later, Whittington suffers a heart attack due to a pellet lodged in his heart from the incident.

January 25: Disney purchases Pixar (from Lucasfilm Ltd.) for seven million dollars.

March 21: A new social network, Twitter, launches.

September 29: U.S. Representative Mark Foley, a Republican, resigns after allegations of inappropriate emails with House pages.

October 9: North Korea claims to have conducted its first ever nuclear test.

October 10: Saddam Hussein is sentenced to death by hanging, at the end of his trial in Iraq. The sentence is carried out on December 30.

November 7: In a wave election, Republican candidates—buffeted by anti-war sentiment, charges of corruption related to Abramoff, and accusations of incompetence over Iraq and Hurricane Katrina—lose control of Congress. Democrats sweep the house 232-202 and take back the Senate. President Bush describes the election as a “thumping.”

November 8: Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld resigns after the results of the election.

November 25: Iraq erupts into chaos. More than 215 people are killed in car bombs and mortar attacks in Sadr City.

December 26: Former president Gerald Ford passes away.

Altered (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Adam Kaufman (Wyatt); Catherine Mangan (Hope); Brad William Henke (Duke); Mike C. Williams (Otis); Paul McCarthy-Boyington (Cody); Misty Rosas (Foki Scout); James Gammon (Sheriff Henderson); Joe Unger (Mr. Town).

CREW: Rogue Pictures, and Haxan Films presents *Altered*. Casting: Linda Phillips-Palo. Production Designer: Andrew White. Costume Designer: Emily Harris. Special Effects: Spectral Motion. Music: Tony Cora, Exiquio Talavera. Director of Photography: Steve Yedlin. Film Editor: Michael Cronin. Producers: Robin Cowie, Gregg Hale. Executive Producer: Bob Eick. Story by: Jamie Nash and Eduardo Sanchez. Written by: Jamie Nash. Directed by: Eduardo Sánchez. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Fifteen years after a group of redneck buddies were abducted by aliens at isolated Nixon's Farm, three of them (Cody, Otis and Duke)—*armed with bear traps and shot guns*—return to the scene of the crime to bag themselves one of the offending extra-terrestrials. These hillbillies unexpectedly prove successful in their unusual quest to capture an alien, and they bind the offending, captured creature in duct tape. They drag the injured creature to the secure compound of their former buddy, Wyatt (Kaufman), who was also abducted by the aliens, but spent more than two terrifying days in their presence and now deeply fears them. Wyatt's girlfriend, Hope (Mangan), calls the police over the situation, but before the local sheriff can arrive, a night of terror ensues.

COMMENTARY: *Altered* is likely one of the weirdest “revenge” movies ever produced, and one featuring some great genre twists. Specifically, one of the rednecks, Cody (McCarthy-Boyington), becomes infected by the alien's blood and his flesh begins to rot away a layer at a time. The aliens also possess hypnotic mental powers, and so the captive from another world manages to hypnotize and take control of Hope for a duration. And then, there's the incredibly disgusting scene in which the escaped,

slobbering alien monstrosity leverages the freedom of yanking out—and playing tug of war with—the intestines of Otis (Williams).

But the thing is this: *Altered* is a really, really low-budget effort, and Eduardo Sanchez—in the honorable tradition of many great B-filmmakers—makes the most of this financial shortfall by limiting the locations but not the scope of his story. *Altered* revolves around seven characters (including the alien), and only two or so locations, mainly Wyatt's garage/workshop. It's a pressure-cooker, and the tension in the film quickly expands to unbearable levels as Wyatt and his friends battle over how to handle the restrained alien.

Wyatt—who shares an enigmatic mental link with the beings—senses that if human beings kill an alien, they'll put us *all* down. “*You know what happens when an animal kills a human?*” he asks Hope. “*It would be a goddamn massacre.*” Wyatt sees it as his job to rein in his overzealous buddies and even protect the alien at the same time that he hates and fears it. Kaufman anchors the film with his intense, human performance, a superb turn.

The angry, irrational Cody, meanwhile, seeks revenge for the death of his brother Timmy fifteen years earlier, during the first encounter with these green-skinned, monstrous creatures. His father actually blamed Cody for Timmy's death, and Cody has lost his very family over the aliens. This subplot gives the film one of its few humorous scenes; a macabre and ghoulish punchline with a char-broiled alien corpse on a front porch.

As far as the other characters, Hope, in some sense functions as a surrogate for the audience: she just wants to get out of the house alive. Otis and Duke, by contrast, seem to be seeking emotional closure over the event that haunts their lives and their dreams.

Director Sanchez succeeds despite some dodgy alien make-up, particularly in one scene involving the alien behind a bed post, because he adheres rigorously to the tenets and outline of the *revenge picture*. In basic terms, this movie is about a hostage and hostage takers. In the tradition of the genre, the hostage eventually wins over some of his captors, not by cajoling and appealing to their humanity, ironically, but by mentally/psychically taking them over; by brainwashing them. And, also in adherence to the conventions of the revenge pictures, the roles in the film are constantly shifting. The hunters quickly become the hunted, as they bicker pointlessly amongst themselves. And the prey, in the end, pulls a surprising and nasty *coup de grace* that audiences won't see coming.

Within the revenge film formula, the director of *Altered* keeps viewers on edge by continuously tossing up curve balls. The redneck characters, for instance, are not the sharpest tools in the shed, especially Otis, and they keep making basic mistakes in their care of the alien, mistakes that more educated, less angry, less emotional folk might not make. For instance, they keep forgetting to close and lock doors behind them; they keep crossing the red line of paint on the floor around the alien that they are not supposed to breach, and they keep taking their eyes off the captive.

And then there's the alien himself, who is vicious, fast-moving, cunning and may be part of an elaborate strategy to locate and re-abduct Wyatt. The wounded alien may have permitted himself to be caught *on purpose*, so that the aliens could finally locate Wyatt, who lives in the woods and has surgically-extracted a weird, clicking biological implant.

On top of all the narrative uncertainties and twists, Sanchez gleefully piles on extreme violence and especially gore. *Altered* pulls no punches in terms of upsetting, gory imagery and it is all handled extraordinarily well, and in welcome *practical* terms (no CGI, thank you.) The alien, at least in dim lit, is terrifying. In one sequence, the savage creature ambushes Wyatt in a blood-soaked bathtub, and then skitters out of the tub after the human and it's enough to make you crawl out of your skin. It's just too bad the alien could not remain hidden, or in half-light, more often.

Altered engages the intellect with story possibilities at the same time that it knowingly upsets the stomach. For a horror enthusiast, that's a potent combination. The film is not at all slick, and not very polished, unlike so many horror products of modern vintage. *Altered* is messy and a little rough, a loud, jangling affront to the senses. If one is in the mood for a dedicated, old-fashioned, balls-to-the-wall B movie with more guts than greenbacks, this is it. Again, some of the alien effects and spaceship effects in *Altered* are admittedly not-so-great. But the writing, the performances and the overall, almost-

hysterical, panicked mood of the piece combine to make this a memorable effort, nonetheless.
Seven characters. One room (basically). And lots of gore,
That's a recipe that really works for Sanchez in this case.

An American Haunting * *

Critical Reception

"The spirits make way too much noise in this supernatural tale whose overbearing clamor is redeemed to a large extent by engaging performances and fine 19th century period detail."—David Germain, *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 12, 2006, page 3E.

"This film is filled with excellent acting and great camera tricks and special effects that effectively evoke the supernatural experience."—John Gaudiosi, *Home Media Retailing*, September 24–30, 2006, page 25.

"*An American Haunting* ... unfortunately loses its way thanks to a poor plot and less than inspired special effects. Sissy Spacek and Donald Sutherland should have given this a miss."—*Breaking News.ie*, August 25, 2006.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Donald Sutherland (John Bell); Sissy Spacek (Lucy Bell); James D'Arcy (Richard Powell); Rachel Hurd-Wood (Betsy Bell); Matthew Marsh (James Johnston); Thom Fell (John Bell Junior); Zoe Thorne (Theny); Gay Brown (Kathe Batts); Sam Alexander (Joshua Gardner); Miquel Brown (Chloe); Vernon Dobtcheff (Elder #1).

CREW: Freestyle Releasing, Allan Zeman Productions in association with Redstar Productions, Midsummer Films and After Dark Films presents *An American Haunting*. Casting: Gary Davy. Costume Designer: Jane Petrie. Production Designer: Humphrey Jaeger. Music: Caine Davidson. Special Effects: Effects Associates, Big Bang Digital Studios, Men from Mars. Director of Photography: Adrian Biddle. Film Editor: Richard Comeau. Producers: Christopher Milburn, Andre Rouleau, Courtney Solomon. Executive Producers: Julien Remillard, Allan Zeman. Based on the novel by: Brent Monahan. Written and Directed by: Courtney Solomon. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 83 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An old journal found in a modern home's attic recounts the story of a local haunting in 1818. There, a local businessman, John Bell (Sutherland), charge a local woman, Kate Batts (Gay Brown), exorbitant interest, breaking church law, and believed that she was a witch, cursing him and his family. After a confrontation with Batts, Bell's family, especially his daughter, Betsy, began to experience strange visions and horrifying night terrors. The haunting went on for months, even as Batts told Bell that she had issued no curse, and that he had cursed himself. His wife, Lucy (Spacek), soon came to realize that the apparent supernatural "haunting" was actually a psychological symptom of the abuse Bell had visited on Betsy, upon her adolescence and sexual maturity. Now, in the present, the reader of the journal takes this information to save her own daughter from her father's sexual abuse.

COMMENTARY: *An American Haunting* should have been a great horror movie. It features a remarkable cast, including Donald Sutherland and Sissy Spacek, involves a long-standing regional legend—the Bell Witch—and features some stand-out sequences, including one in which an apparent supernatural force races from a family house, accelerates across the countryside, and then smashes into a horse and carriage, miles away. The rest of the movie can't quite live up to that memorable visual, and the film's ending, though relevant, perhaps, to the Bell Witch legend, seems to come out of left field.

There is a school of parapsychological thought that states there is no such thing as actual supernatural events, only manifestations of human psychological injuries. Poltergeists, for example, are

often thought to be the external psychic blasts associated with turbulent adolescence. In other words, supernatural creatures such as ghosts or demons are actually manifestations of pathological or neurotic human minds. *An American Haunting* takes a similar, and not uninteresting route, explaining that all of Betsy's apparent demonic encounters are instead the result of sexual abuse by her father. Again, she's an adolescent, a time of life that parapsychologists associate with poltergeist activity, so the story fits.

The specter of a young girl that only she sees, can thus be interpreted as her lost innocence, a division of what she was before her father destroyed her. Part of the problem arises, however, in the intensity of her encounters. Betsy is dragged out of her bed, up into the air, her feet dangling in space. She is causing her own levitation?

Similarly, if she is the root cause of the psychic manifestations, how can it be both in her house, far away, and in the carriage where she is traveling, in the aforementioned horror scene?

In short, there seems to be a disconnect between the horrors witnessed, and the ultimate explanation.

Parts of it work, for certain. Lucy, Betsy's mother, represses the horror of what her husband has done, and remembers what she sees as supernatural. Then one day, she just seems to wake-up and recognize her husband's foul deed. It's as if her mind can't process the horror at first, and then she comes out of a stupor. This development seems true, and psychologically adroit. But again, it doesn't repair the disconnect between the intensity of the horror, and the reality of what has been done.

In terms of the actual legend, *An American Haunting* is not wildly inaccurate to the details. There are accounts, unconfirmed, about the Bell Witch that it was something John Bell made up to arrange a marriage for his daughter Betsy. So again, the supernatural was utilized as cover for something very real, and very human: avarice.

Intriguingly, this film is not called *The Bell Witch Haunting*, or something like that; rather *An American Haunting*. John's particular crimes are venal, selfish ones and financial in nature, first, and then about breaking the sanctity of familial relationships. The former crime, taking financial advantage of the less fortunate, is one that plagued America in the 2000s, from the Enron and WorldCom scandal of 2001 to the onset of the Great Recession in 2008. John's crime in the film is breaking church law and overcharging a woman landowner interest. Enron, of course, manipulated energy prices, but the crimes aren't far different. Both are about ill-gotten, immoral fiduciary gain, at the expense of those who can't afford it, and have no real power to correct it.

The sexual abuse is more horrific and personal in nature, obviously, but again, it is about the powerful taking advantage of those without power; about the corrupt establishment (here white patriarchy) using that position to harm those that should be protected. The "American" haunting here is not the supernatural, but the unethical behavior of the ruling white class, and its deadly effect on the innocent. The so-called "supernatural" force is, once more, blow-back for financial and sexual crimes imposed on those who can't really defend themselves, and don't have access or recourse to the law.

Alas, this idea, while noteworthy, doesn't really come through consistently in the film. Donald Sutherland's performance makes John Bell inscrutable. He knows what he has done, yet still goes to Batts asking to be released from the curse? He plays the part like a bewildered family man, when in fact, Bell is a scoundrel. He should know from the first moment that there is no curse, beyond his own lack of conscience. Instead of spending time building Bell's character, which is the root of the monstrosities featured in the film, *An American Haunting* routinely focuses on the symptoms of his crime, the apparent demonic incursions. There are several repetitive stay-awake shots in the film, moments in which characters experience something terrible, then wake-up sweating in their beds, only to realize it is a dream. And then, perhaps realizing the repetitive nature of the attacks, the film resorts to black-and-white sequences of the unseen force moving about Betsy and her bedroom. These shots are applied inconsistently. Sometimes the attacks shift to black and white, sometimes they are in color. At one point, another colored filter is applied, though the reason for it is not immediately apparent. As a result of the scattershot approach, *An American Haunting* is never really scary. Instead it is repetitive and a bit dull.

An American Haunting is a film smart enough to realize "*there's something evil here*," encoded in the beginnings of America's culture, favoring white male power and interest over all others, but the film

is not clever enough to put the story together with the apparent supernatural incursions in a way that makes any sense, visually, or thematically.

Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"The film is as impressive for its nimbleness at avoiding the pitfalls of the mockumentary genre as it is for all the right notes it hits."—Matt Wedge, *Film Monthly*, March 21, 2007.

"Director Scott Glosserman and co-writer David J. Stieve clearly absorbed a lot of slasher movies before making their own. *Behind the Mask* is both funny and exciting because they thoroughly understand the nuts and bolts of the genre. The film mocks worn-out clichés, then cleverly uses those same clichés to assemble something that's genuinely suspenseful."—Mike McGranahan, *The Aisle Seat*, last retrieved October 21, 2020.

"Parodying the genre while not mocking it, *BTM* treats serial killing as a valid profession, like bank teller or door-to-door salesman. Our killer has colleagues and friends who know what he does, support his choices, and brainstorm ideas with him. Our documentary crew follow Leslie Vernon like a rock star at an event, while he moves all his victims into place for his night of terror. It's all very methodical and clinical, which lends itself to perfect satire. Brilliantly, while most of the evening is very tongue-in-cheek, when the tide turns for the victims, Leslie Vernon evolves into a brutal, menacing monster."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Nathan Baesel (Leslie Vernon); Angela Goethals (Taylor Gentry); Robert Englund (Doc Halloran); Scott Wilson (Eugene); Zelda Rubinstein (Mrs. Collinwood); Bridgett Newton (Jamie); Katie Lang Johnson (Kate Miner); Ben Pace (Doug); Britain Spellings (Todd); Hart Turner (Shane); Krissy Carlson (Lauren); Travis Zariwny (Dr. Mueller); Teo Gomez (Stoned Guy); Matt Bolt (Slightly More Stoned Guy); Jenafer Brown (Virgin Girl); Kane Hodder (Guy at Elm Street House).

CREW: Anchor Bay Entertainment, Gathr Films, Glen Echo Entertainment and Code Entertainment present *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon*. Casting: Marisa Ross, Matthew Skrobalak. Costume Designer: Raquel L. Jaffe. Production Designer: Travis Zariwny. Music: Gordy Haab. Director of Photography: Sean Presant. Producer: Scott Glosserman. Executive Producers: Al Corley, Andrew Lewis, Eugene Musso, Bart Rosenblatt. Written by: Scott Glosserman. Directed by: Scott Glosserman, David J. Stieve. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A documentary film crew led by director Taylor (Goethals) follows a slasher wannabe on ascent, Leslie Vernon (Baesel), as he hopes to compete with Freddy, Jason, Michael and the other greats. Taylor and the crew follow Vernon as he selects his next female victim, and meet his mentor, the gentle former slasher, Eugene (Scott). Meanwhile, Leslie's would-be nemesis, Doc Halloran (Englund), also gears up to stoff this monster in the making before his next murder spree.

COMMENTARY: Let's not beat around the bush: *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* is one of the most inventive horror films ever made, and also, accordingly, one of the ten finest genre films of the 2000s. This assessment is made for several reasons. First, the film is set in a kind of SCU—Stalker Cinematic Universe—that joins the likes of Freddy, Michael, Jason and Chuck into one hilarious, combined reality. Secondly, the film, by creating such a reality, offers a masters' level dissertation on the slasher paradigm, correcting its flaws, even noting its beauty, throughout the film.

Lastly, *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* is actually pretty darn scary. The film is laugh-out-loud funny throughout, but the humor is disarming, making one feel that the game here is laughs,

not screams. Then, in the final act, Leslie begins his campaign of terror, and the realization is made that Taylor, the mockumentary director, is the true final girl and object of Vernon's violence. The terror ramps up, and is as effective here and even more so, than in many *Halloween* or *Friday the 13th* sequels.

Behind the Mask plays brilliantly and knowledgeably with the conventions of the slasher format, and in doing so, comments meaningfully on it as an art form. The audience follows, step-by-step, with Angela, as Leslie Vernon explains exactly how a Michael Myers or a Jason operates in the world. Leslie discusses Step #1, the anchor or location for his legend (in this case, an apple orchard where his body was found). Step #2 involves the "target group" of his rampage, because a final girl must universally have a "supporting cast." This is exactly the victim pool, as described in my book *Horror Films of the 1980s*. Step #3 is the "flyby," the first time that the slasher and the final girl meet, and the promise of things to come. Think of Laurie Strode seeing Michael in her backyard, betwixt fluttering laundry lines, in *Halloween*. On and on these steps go, offering a perfect dissection of the slasher movie paradigm.

Cleverly, *Behind the Mask* not only recites the elements of the paradigm, it finds room to comment on the genre. For instance, Vernon seems to acknowledge that the wholesale repetition of the steps has created not just a formula but dictated the very shape of horror. He notes, for example, that Freddy, Jason and Michael "have made an art form of it" (their slashing). Vernon also seems, in advance, to respond to the Rob Zombie approach to a figure like Michael Myers. "This has nothing to do with where I came from," he suggests, eschewing a psychological motive for his anti-social behavior. Also, this author admires how all the characters lean into the utter irrationality of many slasher backstories.

"On the anniversary of my death, I'm going to reappear," Vernon promises.

How does one survive death to re-appear, one might ask?

Well, consult with Jason, who drowned in the waters of Crystal Lake, but still came back as a hulking slasher, without explanation, years later.

In short, *Behind the Mask* not only gets the joke, it internalizes the joke and crafts its world around the inconsistencies that seem to dominate the slasher franchise, and which allow Jason, Michael and Freddy to terrorize audiences again and again, even though they die, persuasively, in every film entry in their canons.

Behind the Mask also recognizes the vital symbiosis between slasher and figure of useless authority/nemesis (Leslie/Halloran or Michael/Loomis) and even the connection between slasher and final girl, a kind of obsession that is, quite clearly, at least if this film is to be believed, a love based on attraction, and a thorough understanding of one another. The flyby, in its own way, feels oddly romantic.

I wouldn't want this review to indicate that *Behind the Mask* only makes insightful jokes about slashers. On the contrary, it goes to great length to establish a reality to this combined universe. Hence, the film takes Leslie Vernon through an extensive pre-staging of a crime scene before the victim pool has arrived. It is a meticulous process, this staging of a house and the surrounding grounds, one that involves setting up props, sealing off certain escape paths, and directing the victims in a certain direction, at specific times.

Ever wonder how victims can't escape on the run, when Michael is always walking behind them at a slow and steady gait? Leslie Vernon has the answer. Good staging makes it so that a slasher shouldn't have to break a sweat.

But if he does have to break a sweat, Leslie has his cardio routine.

So, it's not just that the film is smart and funny. *Behind the Mask* is also imaginative and has the effect of actually deepening all the conventions of the slasher paradigm by re-examining them. In an entertaining way, this movie legitimizes the form, and the universe of *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, or *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. It does so, one might add, in a thoroughly winning and charming fashion. Finally, the film even makes a case this author often makes, that horror films are necessary in every society.

"You need to have evil," Vernon notes, so that you can have good.

Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon could have been smug, or superior. Instead, it's remarkably fun, and its last act works well as horror.

My assessment?

Black Christmas ★ 1½

Critical Reception

“The girls are so poised as lambs to the slaughter that the story can almost be seen as a deconstruction of slasher archetypes. Or maybe it’s just bad writing.”—John Mona-ghan, *McClatchy Tribune*: “*Black Christmas* better than many 2006 horror blunders,” December 26, 2006, page 19.

“*Black Christmas* doesn’t stand much chance at being anything more than a lump of coal—not only is it a bad Christmas movie, it’s also a bad horror-movie remake. The original *Black Christmas* is sort of quaint in that ’70s horror-movie way, but the 2006 incarnation was just Dimension Films spewing out a piece of garbage in the hopes of making a couple of bucks before the new year.”—*Grizzly Gazette*: “The 15 Worst Christmas Movies of All Time,” December 22, 2009, page 27.

“*Black Christmas* lacks the timing and visual wit to make its splattery EC Comics gags either genuinely scary or funny-as silly as it may sound to carp about nuance when you’re talking human-flesh gingerbread men”—Jim Ridley, *The Village Voice*, January 3, 2007, page 68.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Katie Cassidy (Kelli Presley); Michelle Trachtenberg (Melissa); Mary Elizabeth Winstead (Heather Fitzgerald); Lacey Chabert (Dana); Kristen Cloke (Leigh Colvin); Andrea Martin (Ms. Mac); Crystal Lowe (Lauren Hannon); Oliver Hudson (Kyle Audry); Karin Konoval (Billy’s Mother); Dean Friss (Agnes); Robert Mann (Billy); Jessica Harmon (Megan); Leela Savasta (Clair Crosby); Kathleen Cole (Eve Agnew).

CREW: MGM, Dimensions Films, 2929 Productions, Adelstein-Parouse Pictures, Hard Eight Pictures, Hoban Segal Productions and Victor Solnicki Productions presents *Black Christmas*. Casting: John Papsidera. Production Designer: Mark Freeborn. Costume Designer: Gregory Mah. Special Effects: Soho VFX, SPIN West VFX, Lindala Schminken FX. Music: Shirley Walker. Director of Photography: Robert McLachlan. Film Editor: Chris Willingham. Producers: Marty Adelstein, Steven Hoban, Glen Morgan, James Wong. Executive Producers: Marc Butan, Bob Clark, Mark Cuban, Scott Nemes, Noah Segal, Todd Wagner. Based on the 1974 screenplay by: Roy Moore. Written and Directed by: Glen Morgan. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A psychotic killer, Billy Lenz (Mann), escapes from the mental institution, and returns home for the holidays. The house where he grew up, however, is now a sorority house at a local university. There, as the sisters come and go for Christmas, Billy begins to murder the women he sees as interlopers one by one.

COMMENTARY: Many die-hard horror fans regard the original *Black Christmas* (1974) from director Bob Clark as an unheralded or at least underappreciated classic. These aficionados will note how the film sets up many of the core tenets of the slasher film genre, later popularized in more mainstream fare such as *Halloween* (1978) or *Friday the 13th* (1980). It had P.O.V. stalk shots, used the telephone as an instrument of terror, and set up a sequel that never came, for instance. In *Horror Films of the 1970s*, I wrote this of Bob Clark’s original: “*Black Christmas* is pretty good at what it does most of the time. The body of the film is fit, and many suspense and attack scenes are well-orchestrated.”

Although not a perfect film by any means, the original, disco era *Black Christmas* achieves something else, which the remake brings into better clarity. The original film sincerely attempts to create an atmosphere of sustained and serious terror around its isolated setting, a college sorority house during the winter holidays. Whatever its flaws, the original *Black Christmas* is a *naturalistic* slasher film, meaning it is played straight, and without supernatural or fantasy overtones. It takes itself seriously. It

respects the genre and its own narrative.

The remake, which comes from Glen Morgan, whose genre credits are largely unimpeachable (*The X-Files*, *Millennium*, *Final Destination*, *Willard*, *The Twilight Zone* [2019]), adopts a totally different approach, and one that doesn't entirely succeed. The remake treads heavily into cartoon territory with an over-the-top depiction of the killer, Billy Lenz, and the insane asylum where he is incarcerated.

Further, the film treads into a not very believable back story for this monster, Billy: an unhappy and highly dysfunctional family life. In short, the remake feels very campy and over-the-top, eschewing the naturalistic and even gritty or realistic approach of its source material. This approach makes the film's characters harder to invest in, and the situations less terrifying.

The remake problem or syndrome is in full force here.

So, Mr. John Kenneth Muir, you might rightly ask, you want *Black Christmas*, the remake, to be the same movie as its source material? Is that what you're saying?

The answer is an unequivocal "no." *Black Christmas*, the remake, need not be a slavish re-do of the original film. However, on a basic level, the filmmakers of the disco decade original respected their B movie material and tried to make that world feel as real and believable as possible, so as to scare the audience. The filmmakers here don't make that effort. What the remake gains in terms of style and campiness, it loses in terms of terror, and even basic realism. The original film drew much suspense from the idea of the obscene phone killer (there referred to as The Moaner). This idea is not given the same heft in the remake, and so the killer, despite the goriness of his escapades, feels less menacing, and less real.

This outcome is a crying shame since the film features a great cast that includes the impressive Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Michelle Trachtenberg, Katie Cassidy, Kristen Cloke, and one of the great underrated actors of our day, Karin Konoval. They deserve better than to inhabit a universe that never feels real or believable, but instead one that feels over-the-top. One gets the feeling watching the film that the creators felt there wasn't enough "there" to remake the film: a straight, suspenseful retelling of a killer hiding in a sorority house and murdering its sisters.

So instead, the film goes for gory and cheap gags, shallow characters, and a family history for Billy Lenz that seems ripped from the pages of a comic book (perhaps, at least, an EC one). It's as if in a post-*Scream* (1996) milieu, the filmmakers came to believe they couldn't just tell the story well and tell it straight.

Instead, it had to become post-modern and over-the-top.

The organizing principle here, of course, is Christmas, and so all the aspects of the winter holiday are brought into play. This means a world of eye-ball tree ornaments, candy cane stabbings, and a killer who escapes his incarceration by dressing as Santa Claus.

For a while, it all feels more like a remake of *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984) than *Black Christmas*.

But the bottom line is that the modest but effective original has been replaced by a freak show that strives to present a consistent atmosphere and fails egregiously. Many of these 2000s remakes of slasher films succeed only to the degree that they point out a bigger budget doesn't make a better example of the form. A low budget and an independent or hungry filmmaker often goes for broke, even while respecting their narrative. This *Black Christmas* feels as though it is a lark, a game, and since nobody behind the camera seems to truly invest, why should the audience?

Glen Morgan knows how to forge horror, and he knows how to make horror both suspenseful and funny. So, it's odd that this film reeks of a kind of smug superiority. Instead of working with the audience to create a scary movie, this is a film that feel superior to the audience, like it is more concerned with style and fantasy than in telling a good slasher story.

LEGACY: *Black Christmas* was remade yet again in 2019, this time with a more overtly feminist bent. It was a failure at the box office.

The Breed * * *

Critical Reception

“Breed [sic] is a standard date thriller with run-of-the-mill thrills created by jump cuts usually involving the sudden appearance of a highly excited hound seeking human flesh to chow down on. The result is predictable but efficient, with mundane dialogue required to fill in the blanks and whenever possible make mention of other famous dogs including Lassie, Old Yeller and Cujo. The combination of obvious humor and sudden shrieks could scare up some box office in soft markets, but the film’s destiny is the DVD shelf.”—Ray Bennett, *Hollywood Reporter*, May 4–May 6, 2007, page 19.

“The Breed runs out of steam after a while—there are only so many times that getting attacked by dogs can be scary, especially when they look quite friendly most of the time.”—Roz Laws, *Sunday Mercury*: “Horror goes to the dogs,” April 29, 2007, page 7.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Michelle Rodriguez (Nicki); Oliver Hudson (John); Taryn Manning (Sara); Eric Lively (Matt); Hill Harper (Noah); Nick Boraine (Luke); Lisa-Marie Schneider (Jenny).

CREW: Film Afrika Worldwide, ApolloProMovie & Co. 1. FilmProduktion, EDJ Productions and First Look International present *The Breed*. Casting: Bill Kravitz, Benedicte Roumega, Christa Schamberger, Julia Verdin. Production Designer: Johnny Breedt. Costume Designer: Diana Cilliers. Music: Marcus Trump. Special Effects: Anton Voster, Simon Hansen. Director of Photography: Giulio Biccari. Film Editing: Nathan Easterling. Producers: Thomas Becker, Karen Vudla, David Lancaster, Marianne Maddalena, David Wicht. Executive Producers: Wes Craven, Basil Ford, Hal Sadoff, Moses Silinda, Jorg Westerkamp, Henry Winterstern. Written by: Robert Conte, Peter Wortmann. Directed by: Nicholas Mastandrea. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Five college students fly to a remote island where two brothers, Matt (Lively) and John (Hudson), own a family cabin near the beach. There for a party weekend, the five friends deal with sibling rivalry between Matt, who is studying to be a doctor and dating Nicki (Rodriquez), and John, the self-admitted family “*fuck up*.” Also, on the island—but some distance away—is an abandoned military research facility devoted to the training of “*genetically redesigned*” canines to use in combat. Before long, it becomes clear to the college students that several of the dogs trained to attack humans have been left on the island to fend for themselves and now view humans as food. The dog packs set their eyes on the college students, and the house comes under siege by the animals. Now, Nicki and the others must escape, and are dependent on their ability to zip-line, use archery, and even swim, once the dogs cut their plane loose into the sea.

COMMENTARY: While perhaps not a great or classic horror film, *The Breed* is nonetheless a welcome effort, an often-suspenseful throw-back to such 1970s efforts as *The Pack* (1978), or *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1976). In short, *The Breed* is a siege film featuring a remote setting, a small cast of characters, and a fascinating “natural” villain: attack dogs. What’s rewarding about happening across this particular film in the catalog of the 2000s is that there is little or no CGI in the film, and *The Breed* is rife with good stunts, both involving the attack dogs, and the imperiled human characters. The protagonists must scale roofs, swing from house to barn (and through windows), nudge recalcitrant cars down steep hills, and take on other tasks that make this a more dynamically physical horror film than most forged during the 21st century. You’ll swear, at times, that Michelle Rodriquez is the one doing the stunts herself, and by-and-large the action/horror scenes are well-orchestrated, particularly one involving getting an old car started on that twisty road, and another involving a long swim to a plane floating out to sea. In the latter case, the imperiled characters soon realize not only that dogs can swim too, but they can perch on the drifting plane.

Even the film's central threat, an abandoned military experiment that trains genetically engineered dogs to kill in combat, manages to hark back both to the 1970s and the Vietnam War Era (and secret-military experiment films such as *Piranha* [1978]) and to the then-current "War on Terror Age," post-2001. The seventies and the 2000s are probably the most paranoid of all modern decades (save the 2010s) in terms of suspicion about government conspiracies, and so *The Breed* plays simultaneously as a call-back to old genre glories and something fresh for the time period. The limited cast—just five characters—means that the audience gets to know each character relatively well, and that it matters when they die.

The oldest domesticated animal, dogs are known to be "man's best friend," but in *The Breed*, they act in a pack, like wolves. They communicate, strategize, and show fearsome courage when confronting humans. They operate in the film as a unit, which may be meant as a counterpoint to the human drama going on between brothers Matt and John. Matt and John are competitors, not just for Nicki's affection, but in terms of success. John sees himself as a screw-up, and Matt is becoming a physician. However, John has the killer instinct that Matt lacks. So, *The Breed* sets up not only a battle between unlike siblings but compares them to another family; one of the "*scary ass lassies*," in the screenplay's words.

Wes Craven was executive producer of this horror film, and that kind of family vs. family dynamic is exactly the sort of intellectual gamesmanship his work is renowned for. *The Last House on the Left* pits a civilized family against a criminal one. *The Hills Have Eyes* pits a civilized family against a cannibal one. *The Breed*, while not directed by Wes Craven, has a similar undercurrent, comparing human nature to animal nature.

The Breed is not as smart or savage as either of those Craven-directed classics noted above, and occasionally the dogs, despite all efforts to make them terrifying, simply look cute. But *The Breed* is still a breath of fresh air. It doesn't take animals as a joke (like the *Sharknado* series for example), it doesn't resort to digital effects to generate its terror, and it is grounded in reality and nature. Literally to a one, there is not another horror film of this type in the 2000s catalog. That may make it easy to award *The Breed* the title of *Best in Show*, but it's nice to see an old-fashioned horror movie about "when animals attack," and register that the format still works.

*The Butterfly Effect II (DTV) **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Eric Lively (Nick Larson); Erica Durance (Julie); Gina Holden (Amanda); Dustin Milligan (Trevor Eastman); David Lewis (Dave Bristol); Andrew Airlie (Ron Callahan); Susan Hogan (Katherine Williams); J.R. Bourne (Malcom Williams); Lindsay Maxwell (Grace Callahan); Zoran Vukelic (Christopher); Jerry Wasserman (Alberto Fuentes).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents, in association with Film Engine and Benderspink, *The Butterfly Effect II*. Casting: Heike Brandstatter, Susie Farris, Coreen Mayrs. Costume Designer: Cynthia Ann Summers. Music: Michael Suby. Special Effects: Anthem Visual Effects, Special Effects Shop. Director of Photography: Brian Pearson. Film Editor: Jacqueline Cambas. Producers: Chris Bender, A.J. Dix, Anthony Rhulen, J.C. Spink. Executive Producers: Kevin Kasha, William Shively. Written by: Michael Weiss. Directed by: John R. Leonetti. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Nick, just turning 24, is in a deadly car accident with three friends, including the love of his life, Julie (Durance). He is the sole survivor. A year later, after studying photographs of his friends, he is able to go back in time and prevent the accident. But when he returns to the present, it is altered. He is now poor, and life with Julie is strained. He time travels again to make another change, to become rich. This time, Nick is successful in becoming the vice president of his company, but now he and Julie are no longer an item. The more Nick attempts to control his life, the more it slips out of his grasp. Nick decides

to make one last journey in an attempt to make things right.

COMMENTARY: The inevitability and unpredictability of fate are key concerns of horror films of the 2000s. Much of that is related to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the idea that gripped America of their fellow citizens going to work on a normal, sunny Tuesday, only to be confronted with unimaginable and unpredictable horror. *The Final Destination* franchise, which notably had its start before 9/11 is all about characters seeking to outlive or outlast their random, tragic fates. *The Mothman Prophecies* is about attempting to interpret reality to discover and avoid dark fates, too. One of the better horror films of the decade, *The Butterfly Effect* concerns itself with the same topic: rewriting personal history so as to erase negative outcomes in life, like the death of loved ones. *The Butterfly Effect* is a strong film, even if it isn't often recognized as such, so it was perhaps inevitably that it would be "franchised" and sequels would be produced.

What is shocking about *The Butterfly Effect 2* is just how quickly the creative arteries have hardened; how quickly all the fresh ideas of the original have been cannibalized and made routine through their repetition. At the core of the sequel is the wish-fulfillment premise that we all feel at one time or another.

If only I could go back in time and turn left, instead of turning right....

The Butterfly Effect features a protagonist, Nick Larson, who is trying to change fate and save his girlfriend's life. Saving the life of a romantic partner was also a key notion of the first film. The sequel also resurrects the idea of this bizarre, ad-hoc time travel causing nosebleeds and reality going all wobbly when the timeline is altered and the protagonist travels to a different era. These notions have become the hallmarks of the franchise, but everything in the sequel feels not streamlined, but dumbed-down.

The concepts in *The Butterfly Effect* films are certainly compelling, and timely. But the problem, of course is that the pattern of the original film, including the resolution of the hero's crisis, is repeated hook, line and sinker here. Nick visits his mother, who tells him his father also had the power, and couldn't learn to let go of control. Therefore, he must learn to let go. With few variations, that was the solution in the first movie, too. Here, Nick "wins" and saves Julie by letting her go. Of course, when Nick lets Julie go, she is pregnant with his child, and so there is the inevitable set-up for a sequel. That ending is a problem for other reasons too. It looks like by letting Julie go, Nick did not succeed in separating her fate from his.

But the real problem with this sequel is that it all just feels shallow in comparison to the original, deeper story, despite all the familiar touchstones. By the latter half of the movie, *The Butterfly Effect 2* seems to be little more than a fantasy about changing reality to get rich. Nick keeps going back in time to improve his economic situation, and so the theme of the movie seems to shift a bit into a message that it seems unaware it is showcasing.

Consider: if you traveled back in time to save your loved one, and were successful, but you found you were returning to a worse job ... would it really bother you? Wouldn't you just count your lucky stars you got the love of your life back? Fair trade, and all that? Instead, Nick keeps pursuing an economic agenda, but the film doesn't really reckon with this theme in a meaningful way. He doesn't just want to live happily ever after with the love of his life.

He wants to be rich too.

In its short running time, *The Butterfly Effect 2* features two sex scenes, and one gets the sense that the producers knew exactly what they had here: another DTV franchise with a "big name," but made on the cheap and designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator. The film's advice—"know what you want and make it happen"—dovetails nicely with the final product and its message.

Caveat emptor. Let the buyer beware. Just because someone made *The Butterfly Effect 2* happen doesn't mean you have to bother with it.

The Covenant * 1½

Critical Reception

"This male gloss on *The Craft*—a privileged-teen thriller about young men with powers threatened by the new warlock on the block—has the makings of wildly entertaining schlock, but instead it plays like an episode of some boring show on The CW you've never bothered to watch."—Jesse Hassenger, *Pop Matters*, January 15, 2007.

"It's tough being a middle class white muscular young man who has the powers of a god and has blond busty women hanging around him all the time. God, Renny Harlin knows me so well, he knows the youth so well. *The Covenant* is one part *The Lost Boys*, one part *The Craft* and two parts David DeCouteau with homoerotic undertones, overtones, mid-tones and all."—Felix Vasquez, *Cinema Crazed*, September 11, 2006.

"Harlin has definitely assembled an attractive cast and he shows off their young bodies as often as he can. I think the men were cast more for their abs than their acting. Harlin delivers gratuitous shower scenes that at least serve up both sexes, although the guys get to roughhouse in the gym showers while the girl gets 'stalked' in the dorm shower. There are also a lot of sexist breast and butt shots, the kind of things that in the anime world would be referred to as 'fan service.' But while these pretty boys and girls photograph well, none of them can act."—Beth Accomando, *KPBS*, September 8, 2006.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Steven Strait (Caleb Danvers); Laura Ramsey (Sarah Wenham); Sebastian Stan (Chase Collins); Taylor Kitsch (Pogue Parry); Chace Crawford (Tyler Simms); Toby Hemingway (Reid Garwin); Jessica Lucas (Kate Tunney); Kyle Schmid (Aaron Abbot); Wendy Crewson (Evelyn Danvers); Kenneth Welsh (Provost Higgins); Christian Baril (corpse); Barbara Basia-Jasinski (Waitress); Rob Burns (Mr. Pennyworth); Robert Crooks (Ryan).

CREW: Screen Gems, Eyetronics, Lakeshore Entertainment, Mel's Cite du Cinema and Sandstorm Films present *The Covenant*. Casting: Mindy Marin. Production Designer: Anne Pritchard. Costume Designer: April Napier. Special Effects: Nova Scotia, Buzz Image Group, Sub/Par Pix, Digital Dimension. Music: Tomandandy. Director of Photography: Pierre Gill. Film Editing: Nicolas De Toth. Producers: Garry Luchessi, Tom Rosenberg. Executive Producers: J.S. Cardone, Scott Einbinder, Tom Hillman, Carol Kottenbrook, Andrew Lamal, James McQuaide, Roger Mincheff. Written by: J.S. Cardone. Directed by: Renny Harlin. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The boys of Ipswich in New England boast a secret. As they enter puberty, they begin to manifest supernatural powers in keeping with their blood lines as warlocks, which dates back to the colonization of America. The problem is that until they fully ascend at age 18, the boys' use of those supernatural powers can be like a drug addiction: dangerous to use, and even more difficult to control. One boy from Ipswich, Caleb (Strait), as he nears his 18th birthday and ascension, begins dating a girl from outside of town, Sarah (Ramsey), who doesn't know his secret, or the dangerous powers those in his circle possess. Meanwhile, an outsider, but also a son of Ipswich from an outcast family, Chase (Stan), threatens Caleb and the others with his powers, which he is not at all hesitant to use. To defeat the interloper, Caleb must recruit his father, who has prematurely grown aged through overuse of the supernatural.

COMMENTARY: Of all genre veteran Renny Harlin's horror films, *The Covenant* may just be his absolute nadir. The film is a teeny-bopper, PG-13 horror film that, for some reason, decides to land all wiccan power in the hands of young men, instead of young women, and attempts to feature a subplot connecting puberty and testosterone with the onset of supernatural powers ... which is then compared to drug addiction. J.S. Cardone, who wrote *The Forsaken*, contributed the script here as well, which, like

the earlier horror film, boasts a strong homosexual subtext, which may or may not be intentional, but at least adds something intriguing to a flat horror film.

Women don't get equal representation, typically, in terms of being the "monster" in horror films. One area where that observation is not accurate, however, is with witches, or witchcraft. Movies such as *The Craft* (1996) utilize the organizing principle of witchcraft and wiccan powers to create dramas about adolescent girls growing up and learning to master their powers. Or films such as *Jack's Wife* (1971) use witchcraft to diagram the drudgery of housewives in suburbia. Therefore, it is odd, and somewhat shocking to see a movie about male witches, or warlocks, where testosterone seems to be the magical supernatural ingredient. Equal representation is fine, it is just unusual that a movie about witchcraft is made exclusively the domain of hunky, post-pubescent boys. In an age of unequal pay for equal work, can't women at least keep the witch thing?

The Covenant is incoherent in terms of its metaphors too. Male passage through adolescence—the increase in testosterone, is basically compared to the onset of supernatural abilities. Yet, at the same time, the use of supernatural abilities is compared to addictive drug use. So, increased testosterone is addictive? Is that the point? It isn't entirely clear.

Also, not clear is the breadth and depth of the Ipswich boys' powers. Police chase them on the highway at one point, and the witches are able to rewind time to avoid an accident. This is an amazing ability, to control, actually, the flow of time itself. One of the boys jokes: "*Harry Potter can kiss my ass*," and he is right, if the Ipswich Boys can alter reality on such a basic level. Of course, if that is possible, why not use the time-rewind ability to defeat the interloper, Chase, in their midst?

Perhaps because he could then rewind time more?

The elephant in the room here, however, is the unacknowledged homosexual subtext of the film. The dialogue throughout is rife with coded commentary about the boys, that suggests their bond is more than a bromance.

"*Let's just keep this between the sons of Ipswich*," notes one boy.

"*You can't imagine what it's like growing up and not knowing what it was*," Chase says, of the power. But really, what he could be talking about is growing up gay in a heteronormative culture, unaware of how to cope with his feelings and desires for other men.

Before the final battle, one boy says: "*Why don't we get down to business?*" and it could be that he is talking not about fighting, but something more intimate.

And, then, there is the hysterically bad, but again, provocative prelude to battle that again alludes to male on male sexuality:

"*How about I make you my wi-atch?*"

When one couples these abundant innuendos with the swimming pool and locker room scenes, wherein a lot of male pulchritude and nudity is on display, one begins to feel that *The Covenant* doesn't possess the courage to be what it is really about.

And what it really seems to be about (and should have faced head on), is that homosexual subtext that now pervades every scene in the movie but is utterly ignored. This is the 21st century, and it is sad that movies are still tiptoeing around the diversity in human sexuality with movie like this. Again, this negative review is not a result of the homosexual subtext, it's a result of the film expressing a homosexual subtext but without understanding this fact.

The Covenant is slick, fast moving, and utterly confused about what it wants to be. The performances are slick and shallow, the story doesn't make sense, and the movie never bothers to truly clarify or chart the powers of its warlock characters. The covenant with the audience—to tell a story that makes sense—is shattered.

And the movie should have had the courage to be gay, rather than unintentionally and hilariously blind regarding its true nature.

The Descent ★ ★ ★ ★

"...intermittently effective ... carefully establishes the psychological relationships among the women, then squanders this calibrated and genuinely plausible setup with a series of crude, implausible and scattershot horror effect."—Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Chicago Reader*, September 24, 2007.

"...the film follows one character's descent into an unexplored cave system, which almost inherently becomes a metaphorical descent into the unexplored recesses of her own mind. *The Descent* is merciless, but more importantly, it never alters from its attempt to tell the story of a character's confrontation of the hidden aspects of her psychology."—Robert Ring, *Classic Horror*, May 4, 2012.

"If ever there was a Grimm's Fairy Tale for grownups, it is *The Descent*. I will pay this film the highest compliment that I can—I don't EVER want to see this film again because it pushed my buttons too well, from claustrophobia to anxiety, this movie owned me. I watched on a streaming service and paused it multiple times to let myself relax a little—sometimes I wonder how I'd have fared in a theater. The creators of this film likely understand a lot about the structure of classic stories because they capture the key beats of what's supposed to happen when you go underground into the villain's lair (and what's cool, they have no idea they're going into a villain's lair). The main character, Sarah, has to deal with as much as any character I can think of in a horror film (imagine if that trucker didn't come by at the end of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—Sarah in this film wouldn't have even gotten the trucker to help). Maybe there's a fun movie here, I don't know, I was too busy asking myself if I had the guts to continue watching most of the time. If you've never seen it and you like horror films, it's a must-watch, but please don't ask me to watch it with you. Highly recommended—once."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Shauna Macdonald (Sarah); Natalie Mendoza (Juno); Alexa Reid (Beth); Saskia Mulder (Rebecca); Myanna Buring (Sam); Nora-Jane Noone (Holly); Oliver Milburn (Paul); Molly Kayll (Jessica); Craig Conway (Crawler—Scar); Leslie Simpson, Mark Cronfield, Steve Lamb, Catherine Dyson, Julie Ellis, Sophie Trot, Tristan Matthiae, Stuart Luis, Justin Hackney (Crawler).

CREW: Lions Gate and Caledor Films in association with Northmen Productions and Pathe UK present *The Descent*. Casting: Will Davies, Gail Stevens. Costume Designer: Nancy Thompson. Production Designer: Simon Bowles. Music: David Julian. Director of Photography: Sam McCurdy. Film Editor: Jon Harris. Producer: Christian Colson. Executive Producer: Paul Smith. Written and Directed by: Neil Marshall. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A year after Sarah (Macdonald) loses her husband and five-year-old daughter, Jessie (Kayll), in a car accident, she travels with five female friends and adventurers, led by the gung-ho Juno (Mendoza), to a cave system in the Appalachians. This cave system has never been explored, and isn't even on the map, but at first the cave dive goes well. Soon, however, Sarah and the others encounter, deep in the dark, a tribe of savage, cannibalistic humanoid creatures.

COMMENTARY: On first blush, *The Descent* might be dismissed as a collection of 2000s era horror movies conventions. There's the God's Eye View, an aerial shot peering straight down at the Earth that makes the protagonists look small and insignificant. There's the Cabin in the Woods, the frontier inside the borderlands. There's the video camera, which need be the only "surviving" witness to the film's trauma, and there's the drag away or "drag me to hell" shot, characters dragged away from the camera lens into impenetrable darkness and terrifying fates.

Such shots are oft repeated in the genre because they possess power, of course. And *The Descent* builds it foundation upon them, but then goes deeper. The film layers on a suffocating and overwhelming sense of claustrophobia as its cave divers, in ever tighter framing navigate constricting tunnels, collapsing passageways, and cloying darkness to assure their survival in a cave system that, for lack of a better word, is their tomb.

There were reports, upon the film's release, of viewers experiencing panic attacks because of the

subtained scenes featuring inescapable entrapment in the caves, and the “drowning” feelings of claustrophobia the film explores. I can vouch for my own family. My wife was several months pregnant when she watched it, and she had to leave the room during a viewing on at least two occasions. I’m a pretty sturdy type when it comes to horror films, given a 20+ year career reviewing them, and honesty requires me to admit that some scenes of trapped cave divers had me unable to remain seated, pacing behind the sofa until they were finished.

In its exploration of subterranean entrapment, *The Descent* is merciless and relentless. To report that the film is terrifying is to underestimate its impact by a factor of 10.

Yet the film is worthwhile for two other reasons, beyond the fact that it successfully pings some kind of atavistic instinct to escape being buried alive. On the first front, the film makes the most of its cave setting, visually and symbolically. And on the second front, the film offers, much like Neil Marshall’s earlier film, *Dog Soldiers*, a gendered commentary on horror, and survival.

The cave—the dark underneath—is not merely the central setting for *The Descent*, but it is a key symbol in the human psychological gestalt. Consider for a moment just how many stories or myths involve caves. The Orpheus myth, re-told after a fashion in *Silent Hill* (2006), is a story of navigating a cave, or other world, to retrieve a loved one. Plato’s Allegory of the Cave is another example, with the cave representing a kind of ignorance of the masses that humankind must escape or scale. And Carl Jung wrote of the cave as well, reckoning it as a realm of the unconscious. The cave that man fears—or the cave that woman fears, in the specific example of *The Descent*—is the cave that must be explored, to understand one’s self, to achieve enlightenment. Understanding this final concept, the cave as subconscious gauntlet that must be explored, is the one that grants *The Descent* a meaning behind the terrifying imagery and the claustrophobia.

By exploring the cave, and surviving the monsters in the cave, Sarah explores a kind of hellscape that helps her to sift out the signals and memories only her unconscious mind has processed. She learns, for instance, that she already knows of her husband’s infidelity with Juno. She had all the information, but in the cave, that information is confronted and processed. Similarly, the cave, the underworld, offers her opportunity to explore her grief over her daughter’s death. The green of some caverns seems to connect to the green lighting of the hospital where she died, and so forth. In myth, “descent” stories (such as Orpheus’s or Hercules and the procrustean bed) all involve a trip into the underworld where some knowledge of self or purpose is gleaned, and *The Descent* conforms to this idea.

Throughout the film, the idea is presented that the only way out of the nightmarish cave is “down the pipe.” Another way of stating this is that the only way out is through, and the same conclusion might be made of grief. It cannot remain unexamined in the psyche, it must be confronted, and the only way out of grief is to work it every day; to go through it. The film’s descent is not just into a realm of physical, biological monsters, but into the particulars of Sarah’s psychological trauma and pain. Throughout her journey in the hellscape of the cave (made even more hellish in appearance by the crimson light on the rocks from red flares), Sarah keeps experiencing visions of Jessie and her birthday cake and candles.

Sarah’s psychological journey in the film is juxtaposed with Juno’s. Juno, who states that “*if there’s no risk, what’s the point?*” actually goes on something akin here to an ego trip. She leaves behind the map, changes the group’s destination without telling them, and acts in a foolhardy fashion to survive the cave, refusing to confront the fact that she destroyed a marriage, essentially, for a thrill.

If there’s no risk, what’s the point?

These two characters come into stark conflict, naturally, as Sarah processes her loss, and Juno must confront her own immoral actions. *The Descent 2* actually provides the conclusion for this particular story arc, and in a way that, largely, satisfies. But perhaps this is an apt point to note the film’s second strength: its approach to gender. All the cave divers in the film are women, and in general the film paints a strong picture of women. Sarah and the others don’t leave each other behind, don’t fight amongst themselves, until Juno’s transgression is revealed. Sarah’s feelings of protectiveness and nurturing (also seen in her mourning for her child) turn to violence when she learns how Juno has betrayed her trust; and thereby betrayed the team. For Juno, as stated above, it was never really about the team, it was about satisfying her ego, about filling the empty place inside her that could only be glutted by taking risks, not

only with her own life, but with the lives of others.

There are a couple of ways to read the film in terms of feminist studies. Some have suggested that Sarah is punished in the film for her rejection of a traditional female role, of becoming a mother and wife. On the other hand, scholar Chuck Robinson has proposed an alternate reading. In his essay, *Millenial Genres: Woman and Women, Horror Film and Horror Films*, he writes:

It was Juno's idea in the first place to go to this cave, to discover it, explore it, and name it, whereas Sarah is caught inside, must deal, must dwell and counter-dwell. She does not seek to understand, to systemize, but rather to evade, deflect and disperse, to disappear in a self-affirming way. The descent suggests a way of thinking action—feminist action—that does not seek to right “masculinity” or “hegemony,” but rather an agency that disperse molecularly—not one that finds the right path, but one that takes any path, every path, circuitously, not running a course, but flowing from here to there freely.¹⁹

From these various readings and symbols, one might conclude that in the cave of the unconscious, Juno and Sarah each must choose their path, and reckon with their past choices. This reckoning puts them in direct conflict. *The Descent* is so powerful a film for its psychology depth and its juxtaposition of its two lead characters.

On an entirely less rarified level, *The Descent* features one of the best, most effective, and oft-remembered jump scares of the decade of the 2000s, the first reveal of the cannibal monsters in the midst of the group, thanks to the use of night vision function on the team's video camera. That jolt, among many, helps to create an electrifying air of danger and menace.

The 2000s feature a number of cave movies, including *The Cave* and *The Cavern*, but *The Descent* is, rightfully, the effort best remembered. Alone among these modern descent myths, Neil Marshall's unforgettable film connects the idea of a subterranean cave to human psychology, and gives audiences both much to fear (via jump scare and the claustrophobia inducing tight framing), and much to consider, particularly in the depiction of two strong women, Juno and Sarah, whose fates are, for better or worse, intertwined.

Feast * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“Almost by definition a horror movie made by committee, *Feast* really shouldn't work at all, but whilst its ambitions remain resolutely lowbrow, it does at least make for a diverting night in, if enjoyed in tandem with a large pizza and a sixpack.”—Craig Snell, *Den of Geek*, September 21, 2008.

“*Feast* delivers a campy creature feature with its tongue firmly in cheek, but with a breakneck speed and emphasis on practical effects and action. It's a simple and straightforward story that doesn't reinvent the wheel or do anything new, but it does offer up plenty of goofy fun and a few stomach-churning moments.”—Meagan Navarro, *Bloody Disgusting*: “A ‘Feast’ of Creature Feature Carnage,” January 14, 2020.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Bozo (Balthazar Getty); Diane Goldner (Harley Mom); Henry Rollins (Coach); Eileen Ryan (Grandma); Jason Mewes (Himself); Judah Friedlander (Beer Guy); Clu Gulager (Bartender); Krista Allen (Tuffy/Heroine #2); Jenny Wade (Honey Pie); Josh Zuckerman (Hot Wheels); Eric Dane (Hero); Navi Rawat (Heroine); Duane Whitaker (Boss Man); Chauntae Davis (Drunk Girl); Hannah Schick (Finger Girl); Anthony “Treach” Criss (Vet); Tyler Patrick Jones (Cody); Gary Tunncliffe (Mama Beast); Mike J. Regan (Papa Beast); Somah Haaland (Charlie).

CREW: Dimension Films, Maloof Motion Pictures, Live Planet, in association with Neo Art & Logic and The Weinstein Company, present *Feast*. Casting: Michelle Morris Gertz. Production Designer: Clark Hunter. Costume Designer: Julia Bartholomew. Special Effects: Two Hours in the Dark, Neo Digital. Music: Steve Edwards. Director of Photography: Thomas L. Callaway. Film Editor: Kirk Morri. Producers: Michael Leahy,

Joel Soisson, Executive Producers: Ben Affleck, Wes Craven, Matt Damon, Adrienne, Colleen, Gavin, George, Joe and Phil Maloof, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. Written by: Patrick Melton and Marcus Dunstan. Directed by: John Gulager.

SYNOPSIS: At an out-of-the-way, hole-in-the-wall bar in the southwest United States, a motley crew faces off against rampaging, murderous monsters. As those in the bar attempt to survive and escape, the monsters unceasing siege takes victims one and two at a time.

COMMENTARY: Other than *Inside* (2007), John Gulager's *Feast* may just be the wettest horror film of the 2000s. The film features much bloody green vomit, blood floods by the bucketful, and more. It's a splattery mess of goop and grue. The film also overdoses on style, so much so that one can almost miss the fact that the film is largely suspenseless, and more so, narratively a flatline. The mostly underlit film features intellectually ironic moments but revs up from the first moment and stays at high-speed throughout, so that there is no real arc of drama, or intensity. The whole thing drives at a fever pitch which means, essentially, none of it is at a fever pitch. Watching *Feast* is an exhausting endeavor, but not really a scary one.

Feast was born out of a reality TV show, *Project Greenlight*, which focused on competing filmmakers lobbying to get their movies selected for production. John Gulager, the director of *Feast*, was one of the contestants. Certainly, the series had audiences rooting for John. At every turn he was stymied by producers and others who did not trust him or his vision. They second-guessed his cast. They second-guessed where he would place the camera. They grumbled at him for falling behind schedule, and so forth. His artistic "vision," the series made clear, perhaps unintentionally, was second to the commerce aspect of the film: staying on budget, staying on schedule, and making money. After watching the series, horror fans, including this one, supported Gulager and wanted him to have the freedom to make his movie the way he wanted.

Sadly, *Project Greenlight's* behind-the-scenes story is a lot more fascinating than the film that was actually released. It featured all sorts of compelling and infuriating drama. The movie born from that drama is largely drama-less.

One thing is for certain, *Feast* moves at warp speed. It opens with info-graphics super-imposed over freeze-frames of the actors, introducing the audience to the characters without having to use exposition or develop story. Each character is identified by name, occupation and life-expectancy. This data is knowingly snarky. Hero's occupation is "kicking ass," for example. Jason Mewes' life-expectancy is determined to be already exceeded, a nod to the actor's apparent drug-laden life-style. Honey Pie is "dying to get out of town," and "may get her wish." These moments suggest a gamesmanship on the part of the filmmakers, and a post-modern approach to storytelling. Unfortunately, nothing that happens to the characters is ever quite as intriguing as the Tarantino-esque infographics that start the film.

Feast does attempt to surprise audiences with the order of murders in the film, and the politically incorrect nature of the monsters. The Hero gets wiped out during the middle of an inspirational and heroic speech, an inferior knock-off of Samuel L. Jackson's pre-death moment in *Deep Blue Sea* (1999). A little boy gets murdered early on, and "Hot Wheels," a character in a wheelchair gets an info graphic that asks "They wouldn't kill a cripple, would they?"

The monsters are, more than anything, randy. One jumps into the saloon and starts humping a deer's head mounted on the wall. Later, the monster baby is eaten by its mother, and then the parents, after consuming the child, start humping to produce another.

But the problem is that in its non-stop quest to shock, *Feast* instead becomes predictable. One realizes, after a while, that every scene is designed to top the previous one in terms of nastiness. Again, when everything is supposed to be non-stop shocking, nothing feels shocking.

And alas, the execution isn't very good.

Jason Mewes gets his face ripped off in a scene that feels more abrupt than surprising, and the

whole bar is underlit throughout the film, perhaps in an attempt to hide the monsters. Again, the surfeit of style, and the exploitative, trashy tone means that moments don't carry the psychic weight they should. Harley Mom is still alive, for example, when she is sacrificed to bait and destroy the monsters. The moment should be emotional, but it isn't. In a film like *The Hills Have Eyes* (original or remake) the choice to use the matriarch's corpse as bait carries more emotions than anything that happens in *Feast*.

One can speculate why the film feel so rushed. Perhaps it was because Gulager was rushed so aggressively by his producers. But the end result, no matter the reason, is that quality is sacrificed. The film attempts to be cool and smart, a wild ride, but feels very long, and tedious. When the sunlight dawns at the end of the film, for the first time, it indeed feels like a catharsis.

But it is not a "catharsis" in terms of victory or triumph, but rather in the fact that the movie has finally come to an end. *Feast* is famine, an empty viewing experience that is, finally not rendered palatable by a surfeit of style and intellectual gamesmanship.

You'll starve to death here hoping to find a character or moment that doesn't seem hopelessly too cool for school.

Final Destination 3 * * *

Critical Reception

"Judging from the raucous enthusiasm of a preview audience, ill-fated teens are still worth their weight in box-office gold."—Jeff Shannon, *The Seattle Times*: "Final Destination 3: More mayhem, this time with nail guns and tanning beds," February 10, 2006.

"The murder is the only message."—*E! Online*, February 18, 2006.

"Definitely an E-Ticket ride. You know you're being manipulated by a formula, but you allow yourself to be strapped into this rollercoaster, laughing and shrieking and applauding. The secret's in the blood-soaked sauce. Director James Wong and his partner Glen Morgan return to the franchise they started in 2000 after taking a leave of absence from the second *Final Destination*. These *X-Files* alumni come from a world where character development and tight dialogue take precedence over shocks and thrills. Therefore, we build alliances with the characters in these horror films; the protagonists are more than cardboard cutouts in a shooting gallery."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Mary Elizabeth Winstead (Wendy Christensen); Ryan Merriman (Kevin Fischer); Kris Lemche (Ian McKinley); Alexz Johnson (Erin); Sam Eaton (Frankie); Jesse Moss (Jason Wise); Gina Holden (Carrie Dreyer); Texas Battle (Lewis Romero); Chelan Simmons (Ashley Freund); Crystal Lowe (Ashlyn); Amanda Crew (Julie); Maggie Ma (Perry); Ectasia Sanders (Amber); Judi Raciocot (Bludworth).

CREW: New Line Cinema, A Hard Eight Productions, Practical Pictures, Matinee Pictures and Zide-Perry Productions present *Final Destination 3*. Casting: John Papsidera. Music: Shirley Walker. Costume Designer: Gregory B. Mah. Production Designer: Mark Freeborn. Special Effects: Meteor Studios, Soho VFX, Digital Dimension Entertainment Group. Director of Photography: Robert McLachlan. Film Editor: Chris Willingham. Producers: Glen Morgan, James Wong, Craig Perry, Warren Zide. Executive Producers: Richard Brener, Toby Emmerich, Matt Moore. Written by Glen Morgan and James Wong. Directed by James Wong. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: High school senior Wendy Christensen (Winstead) experiences a terrible vision of her friends dying on a rollercoaster at an amusement park. She prevents them from boarding the attraction, and the roller coaster crashes just as she saw it happen in her vision. Now, however, Wendy and her friends have cheated Death, and Death doesn't like to lose. Wendy and her friends soon find themselves in constant danger, as Death attempts to restore its plan, and order, to the universe.

COMMENTARY: Though not as strong a film as *Final Destination* (2000), *Final Destination 3* is a big step up in quality from *Final Destination 2* (2003). That step up comes from a few things.

First, Mary Elizabeth Winstead anchors the film with her strong, grounded performance as the film's protagonist, Wendy.

Secondly, the franchise finds its footing by featuring not just another intense, shock and awe disaster (this time on a roller coaster, instead of at a highway pile-up), but by building up a sense of dread anticipation for that moment so that the accident plays not merely as special effects spectacle, but as the culmination of suspense after a long, slow-burn or build-up.

Finally, this is the first *Final Destination* movie to fully acknowledge 9/11, and the commonalities between that culture changing event and the details of the franchise. For all these reasons, *Final Destination 3* is a better than average sequel, and the likely highpoint for the franchise after the first film.

Just as many people fear flying, or highway driving, *Final Destination 3* taps into a near universal fear of roller coasters. Roller coaster phobia has been designated as a close relative to claustrophobia or acrophobia, but many people suffer from it. This is interesting because, unlike flying, or highway driving, roller coasters can pretty easily be avoided.



Take a ride into terror. Kevin (Ryan Merriman) and Wendy (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) board the rollercoaster of doom in *Final Destination 3* (2006).

Why would someone knowingly scare themselves?

Trick Question!

That is the very purpose of horror movies, which grants *Final Destination 3* a self-reflexive aspect that rivals the original film's approach. Why would any audience put itself through a terrifying film? Because at the end of the roller coaster, and at the end of the horror movie, comes catharsis. Both behaviors (watching a horror movie or riding a roller coaster) involve the feeling of a fear conquered, a gauntlet won, a challenge overcome. Critics often compare movies to roller coasters so it is actually a pretty inventive idea to make the roller-coaster accident the center piece of this sequel.

However, the filmmakers do something else too. I wrote at length about the impressive visual aspects of the pile-up in *Final Destination 2*. All of that commentary remains true, but in that case, the shock and awe visualization is the movie equivalent of rubbernecking. It was the audience stopping to look at carnage that was mesmerizing and immersive, but, finally, just a showcase for editing and special effects.

Final Destination 3 takes a different route. The filmmakers here are interested in the build-up, which again fits with the roller coaster theme. Think about the terror you might feel while waiting in the queue, sometimes for hours, as the roller-coaster you will soon board, rockets nearby with a whoosh, and you hear people screaming. The build-up to the experience is, perhaps, as terrifying (or even more terrifying) as the experience of the ride itself. This film understands that notion. Almost from its first frame, *Final Destination 3* works to build a slow-burn sense of suspense. Wendy takes a photo of a ride before boarding, and the name seen in the photo is "High Die," rather than "High Dive." The coaster that malfunctions, "Devil's Flight" is an off-hand reference, perhaps to Flight 180, from the first film, and decorated with Devilish imagery. The film then takes the audience through each moment of terror leading up to and including the start of the ride (the application of safety harnesses, etc.). The close attention to detail in these shots make the anticipation and suspense of the inevitable accident all the more unbearable.



Death catches up with Ashley (Chelan Simmons) in *Final Destination 3* (2006).

This third film in the franchise also acknowledges the series' unusual relationship with the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which involved hijacked planes being flown into American skyscrapers. The first film came out well before 9/11, but involved an exploding jet, an image that carried special resonance for Americans after September 11. Perhaps more importantly, the first film was all about the way that we can't see our fates coming, and that our fates are, sometimes, not what we would choose for ourselves, even when we are not undertaking dangerous activities.

That sunny Tuesday morning in autumn of 2001, the most dangerous thing 3,000 Americans could possibly do was go to work, as usual, as they did every weekday.

No one saw that coming. *Final Destination* plays with this idea of fate, from the first film's very inception. But watching *Final Destination* after September 11, it became impossible not to think about that tragedy while watching the film. Here, a key subplot involves the nature of mortality, and the nature of Death, if Death is a tangible and unique force. A character notes that "*Osama's still kicking...*" in 2006, referring to Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks. This raises the question also handled in the film. Why do innocent people suffer and die young when it seems the guilty and the evil continue to escape death's grasp? Certainly, many Americans felt that way about Bin Laden, before President Obama ordered a strike that took him out in 2011.

Also seen briefly in the film is a photograph that showcases a jet's shadow over the World Trade Center, and explicitly links the film to 9/11. America during this era had to wonder: Why had this happened? Why had these people been killed? The world after the attacks felt like an alternate universe, like everyone's destiny had been altered by a plan that we couldn't see, couldn't understand, and again, those concepts are the playground on the *Final Destination* films.

It is nice to see this sequel's acknowledgment of the impact 9/11 had on all of us. The most abundantly 9/11 aspect of the film is the question raised "*did I do something to bring this on? Why me?*" That is the one question, for the most part, we cannot answer about death.

Mary Elizabeth Winstead also gets an actual character to play and runs with it. She is someone who is a self-acknowledged "*control freak*." She does not like the feeling of "*having no control*," she says. At one point in the film, during a death scene set in a car, the word "*control*" vanishes from a dashboard safety message. The ongoing theme in the film is very much that control is an illusion for human beings. Like those who went to work on 9/11 unaware of what was to come, we do not have access to our future paths. We have very little control over most aspects of our existence. What does that mean? Do we knowingly live in blissful denial? Is "*blissful ignorance*," in the film's terminology, "*surrendering control*?" Or is it acknowledging reality, and a fact of human life?

If *Final Destination 2* felt dumbed down and like a geek show, or rubbernecking, *Final Destination 3* pulls the series IQ back up through pondering the nature of human life, of illusions of control, and explicitly tying the film's ideas of fate to our national trauma, born of 9/11.

Alas, the momentum could not be maintained, and the series went to NASCAR next.

The Grudge 2 * * *

Critical Reception

"*The Grudge 2* broadens the reach of the Japanese curse that put Sarah Michelle Gellar's doe-eyed gaijin in the hospital, but the scares are the same: the hair, the tub, the yowling cat-boy, etc."—Scott Brown, *Entertainment Weekly*, October 18, 2006.

"...redundant..."—Lisa Rose, *Newark Star-Ledger*, October 16, 2006.

"Puberty causes an exponential increase in evil—and in incoherence—in *The Grudge 2*, the second installment in Takashi Shimizu's saga about a Japanese wraith with a fondness for neck-snapping and Goth makeup."—Jeanette Catsoulis, *The New York Times*, October 14, 2006.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Sarah Michelle Gellar (Karen); Amber Tamblyn (Aubrey); Arielle Kebbel (Allison); Takako Fuji (Kayako); Edison Chen (Eason); Sarah Roemer (Lacey); Matthew Knight (Jake); Misako Ino (Miyuki); Teresa Palmer (Vanessa); Oga Tanaka (Toshio); Jennifer Beals (Trish); Christopher Cousins (Bill); Zen Kajiura (Folklore Guy); Takashi Matsuyama (Takeo).

CREW: Columbia Pictures, and Ghost House Pictures present *The Grudge 2*. Casting: Nancy Naylor Battino, Kelly Martin Wagner. Production Designer: Iwao Saito. Costume Designer: Kristin M. Burke, Miyuki Taniguchi. Special Effects: Big X, Reality Check Studios. Music: Christopher Young. Director of Photography: Katsumi Yanagijima. Film Editor: Jeff Betancourt. Producers: Sam Raimi, Robert Tapert. Executive Producers: Doug Davison, Joe Drake, Nathan Kahane, Roy Lee. Based on the film *Ju On* by: Takashi Shimizu. Written by: Stephen Susco. Directed by: Takashi Shimizu. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Kayako's frightening and unending curse of indiscriminating rage lashes out again, across time, and across different locations. The survivor of a previous outbreak of this curse, Karen Davis (Gellar), is consumed by it at the hospital, this time, after her sister, Aubrey (Tamber), comes to bring her home from Tokyo. Two years later, three schoolgirls visit Kayako's house, and experience Kayako's supernatural power. Finally, this grudge reaches Chicago, in the United States, and imperils a middle-class family.

COMMENTARY: “*This is not about a house; This is rage.... It will spread beyond the house. There can be no end to what has been started.*” With those powerful words, *The Grudge 2* captures perfectly the decade of the 2000s, which, upon historical examination, feels like a constant feedback loop of injury, then revenge.

The 2000s saw Al-Qaeda attack the United States on September 11, 2001, ostensibly over America's activities and foreign policies in the Middle East. America responded to the attack by declaring the War on Terror and attacking Afghanistan. But then America passed “the grudge,” the horror, on to Iraq, which had not attacked the U.S. on September 11. Then regional fighters, insurgents from Iran, spilled into Iraq to fight U.S. forces.

Injury. Revenge. Injury. Re-venge. It never stops.



The specter of rage haunts Karen (Sarah Michelle Gellar) in *The Grudge 2* (2006).

Indeed, these fights continue, in a very real sense, for the United States as of this writing in 2020. American politics of the 2000s feels the same way: cyclical conflicts of slight or injury, followed by electoral vengeance. Republicans dominated from 2001 to 2006, until Democrats did, 2006–2009, until the Tea Party rose to “take back the country.” It’s a constant feedback loop in situations foreign and domestic, without healing, without compromise, without respite.



Misako Uno is attacked by Kayako (Takako Fuji) in *The Grudge 2* (2006).

And again, this is very much Kayako's story. She wants others to suffer as she has suffered, and is an unstoppable, ever expanding force. Here, her terror moves from Japan to the United States, creating new misery for, again, people who didn't cause her misery in the first place.

The Grudge 2 not only continues the urban legend like spread of Kayako's hate, it also continues *The Grudge's* structure, and features three different stories, interspersed, though they occur in different time periods. This approach to narrative storytelling grants the film a welcome but not burdensome complexity. It also, in a very real sense, demonstrates how a curse—a hatred—can live forever, and swallow people, families, perhaps even whole countries, whole. By depicting Kayako's influence in three different time periods and locales, one starts to realize how the effects of hate, the effects of rage, are all but unstoppable.



Toshio (Ohga Tanaka) haunts another victim in *The Grudge 2* (2006).

A top-flight production, with excellent staging and shocks, *The Grudge 2* also benefits from strong connective tissue to the first film, so this feels like a genuine continuation of the tale, not an exploitative sequel. Sarah Michelle Gellar returns as Karen and provides a much-welcome call-back to the original. It is horror movie tradition that the final girl of the first film becomes the first victim of the sequel (see the original *Friday the 13th* [1980], and *Friday the 13th Part II* [1982]), but here Gellar's presence contributes more than connection. Karen did not die in *The Grudge*, though she was traumatized and still impacted by Kayako, but she dies a short time after. This death of a (beloved) character cements the notion that Kayako's hatred is undying. No one, not even our movie-star lead, who survived the first picture, gets a pass. The movie might not have mentioned or showcased Karen at all. Instead, it takes the opportunity of Gellar's return to hammer home the point that no one escapes the grudge alive.

The plot strand about the three young women going to the house and being exposed to Kayako is a fascinating addition to the mythos too, because they are led there by a character named Eason, who should know better. He is fully aware of the danger he is exposing them to, and yet he does it anyway. Again, reading this metaphorically, this character and his actions could be a reflection of an anti-authoritarian viewpoint in the 2000s. The men and women of the Bush Administration knew that there was no danger from Saddam Hussein, even if he could make a nuclear weapon that could deliver its payload to the continental United States. Yet, knowing this, they sent American troops into harm's way.

They said we would be greeted as liberators, but instead our troops were under attack from improvised explosive devices and other dangers.

We were told the insurgency was in its last throes, but again, that was not a statement approximating the reality on the ground in Iraq.

American leaders let men and women go into a situation of extreme danger and pretended there was no danger.

The film even criticizes, at least if one chooses to read the subtext in this fashion, the faith-based decision-making of our leaders. Here, those imperiled by Kayako's ever-spreading curse believe there is a religious answer for her evil, some rite (exorcism) they can conduct to stop the terror.

There is not. There is no way to "*extract the evil spirits.*" Once that anger starts, it cannot be stopped.

The Grudge 2 is not terribly high regarded by critics or horror fans, and that may not be because it does nothing new, but rather because of the way it does something new. Kayako's curse spreads and grows and reaches new territories. That development, along with a solid approach to scares, and the return of Sarah Michelle Gellar, make it a solid sequel to its inspired source material.

The Hills Have Eyes * * * *

Critical Reception

"Action comes in bursts of near pixelated, shrieking assault and battery, with howling, cackling fiends and begging, pleading victims. There are blobs of blood all over the screen, but the business is raced through so quickly that the grueling, upsetting effect of 1970s Craven or Tobe Hooper movies doesn't take hold. Slightly more familiar players than the no-name cast of 1977 bring strong presences, but also a faint air of respectability which limits the movie's effectiveness."—Kim Newman, *Sight and Sound*, April 2006.

"Besides proving to be a faithful mimic of Craven's filmmaking, Aja pours on the gore. But where Aja's version really leaps beyond Craven's both atmospherically and on the violence scale is in the second hour, which has Doug discovering his inner Rambo as he hunts down the mutants to their hideout in an old government testing 'village' (a piece de resistance by Production Designer Joseph Nemec III), complete with mid-century modern homes, decor and eerie nuke-singed American family mannequins."—Robert Koehler, *Variety*, March 6–12, 2006, page 21.

"Directed in tense, concentrated jabs by Alexandre Aja, who wrote the screenplay with Gregory Levasseur, the remake establishes a jittery family dynamic as well as the original, making the heroes of the movie just

sympathetic enough that it stings when they are plunged into a world of utter nihilism and depravity.... So what if this retread replaces the scuzzy punk-rock angst of the original with a corporate sheen? The 1970's are long gone, and with them the relevant modes of 70's cinema. Every generation calls forth the fright films it needs, horror being the most cathartic and subconscious of genres. The strange truth about this new Hills, like the reviled 2003 remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, is that its chic commercial packaging and market-tested atrocities are just as unsettling as the low-budget barbarism of the original. With torture gone mainstream, it's no surprise that brutality is back in the horror film, albeit with a stamp of approval from the Motion Picture Association and an unrated director's cut heading to the DVD shelves at Wal-Mart."—Nathan Lee, *The New York Times*, March 10, 2006, page E19.

Cast & Crew

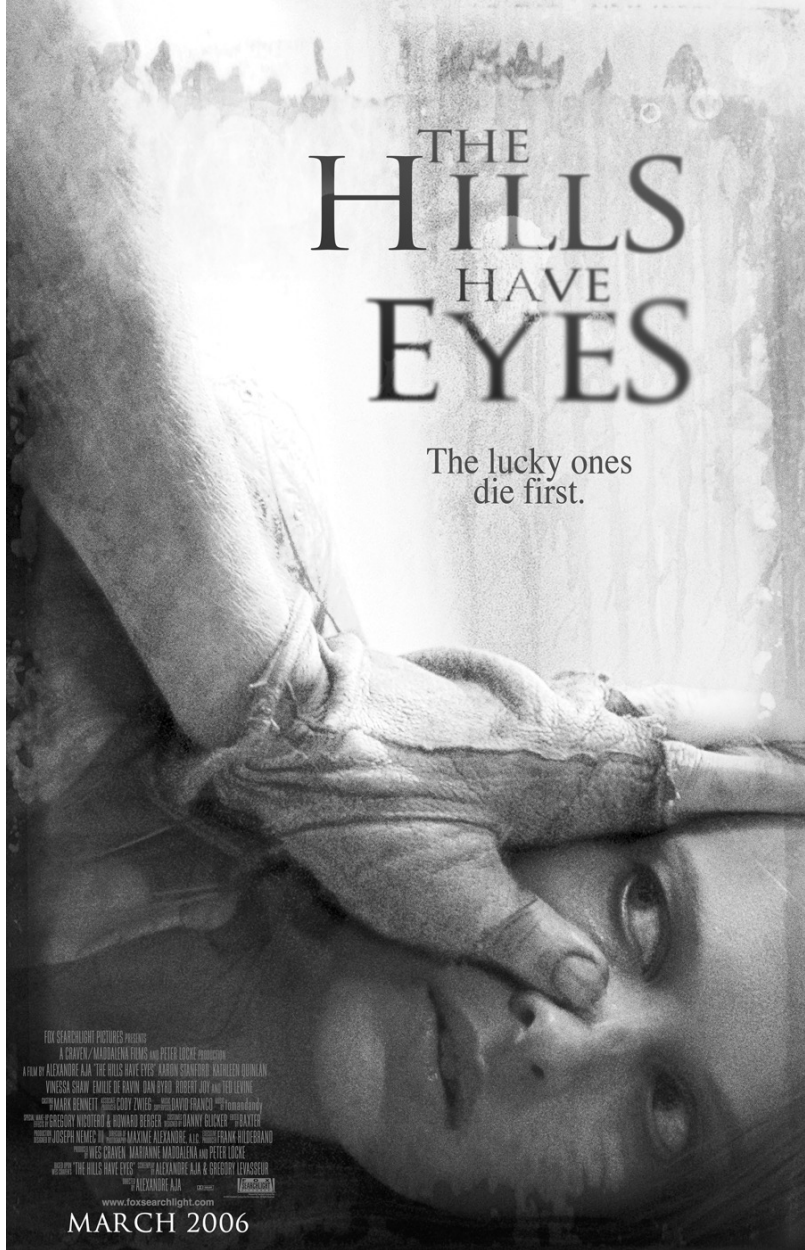
CAST: Ted Levine (Big Bob); Kathleen Quinlan (Ethel); Dan Byrd (Bobby); Emilie De Ravin (Brenda); Aaron Stanford (Doug); Vinessa Shaw (Lynn); Michael Bailey Smith (Pluto); Tom Bower (Gas Station Attendant); Maise Camilleri Preziosi (Baby Catherine); Robert Joy (Lizard); Laura Ortiz (Ruby); Ezra Buzzington (Goggle); Billy Drago (Papa Jupiter); Greg Nicotero (Cyst); Ivana Turchetto (Big Mama); Desmon Askew (Big Brain).

CREW: Fox Searchlight Pictures, Craven-Maddalena Films, in association with Dune Entertainment present *The Hills Have Eyes*. Casting: Mark Bennett. Costume Designer: Danny Glicker. Production Designer: Joseph Nemec III. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Rez-Illusion. Music: Tomandandy. Director of Photography: Maxime Alexandre. Film Editor: Baxter. Producer: Wes Craven, Peter Locke, Marianne Maddalena. Executive Producer: Frank Hildebrand. Based upon the film by: Wes Craven. Written by: Alexandre Aja, Gregory Levasseur. Directed by: Alexandre Aja. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On holiday, the Carter family, led by former cop Bob (Levine), makes for San Diego by taking a detour through the New Mexico desert. After a stop at a gas station, the Carters in their RV, with their German shepherds, come under attack by a family of cannibal mutants who now dwell in the fall-out of a town that was used as an atomic test site. The mutants murder the matriarch of the family, Ethel (Quinlan), as well as her daughter, Lynn (Shaw). Lynn's husband, Doug—derided as a democrat by Big Bob—must now rescue his missing daughter, Catherine, and he teams with a friendly mutant girl, Ruby (Ortiz), to infiltrate their town, and defeat their “nuclear” family.

COMMENTARY: In the 1970s, Wes Craven directed two of the most savage horror movies of all time: *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977). Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the decade of the 2000s is that those films were remade successfully, and without, for the most part, sacrificing the qualities or subtexts of the original movies.

The original *The Hills Have Eyes* was a harrowing study of violence in America, a battle in the desert between the “haves” (in the form of the white bread Carter family) and the have nots (represented by Papa Jupiter and his cannibal family). The film created a powerful contrast between those who lived in comfort, and those who lived in desperate struggle to survive, but found that there is violence in all of us. When threatened, the Carters could be as violent and murderous as their savage counterparts, and in the film's final shot, the screen faded to blood red.



Poster art for Alexandre Aja's remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006).

This author's rule regarding remakes is that the only ones really worth the effort are those that take the framework of the original film and update it to carry the weight, so to speak, of a modern or contemporary context. Remakes that ignore the subtext of the original feel like "less than" in comparison to their source materials. Films that try to slavishly recreate the original cultural subtext feel woefully out of date. And films that take the title, but not the original story—brand name only remakes, in other words—similarly fail to live up to their predecessors. Delightfully, Aja's *The Hills Have Eyes* walks the most difficult path successfully. It adopts the characters, the situation and original theme of juxtaposing civilized and uncivilized families, but updates the context to the 2000s, and in particular the

Iraq War.

As has been written in this book elsewhere, particularly in the reviews of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Wrong Turn* in 2003, the “road trip terror” horror movie is the one that seems to best fit with the post-9/11 circumstances and themes of the decade. These films concern fate (the notion of a wrong turn informing destiny), blowback (punishment for earlier crimes), and the stark unacceptability of a civilized people coming face to face—in an age of peace, prosperity, and technology—with bloody barbarism.

The Hills Have Eyes plays on all these ideas in ways relevant to the middle of the decade in which it was crafted, the age of the Blue State (“Democratic”) vs. Red State (“Republican”) divide over the War on Terror, and the War in Iraq, specifically. In particular, the film notes that Big Bob, a gun-loving former cop, doesn’t like his son-in-law, Doug, who dislikes guns and is a Democrat. In his eyes, Doug is a “fucking pussy” and there is nothing the good, heavily armed U.S.A. cannot achieve. Bob’s Red State assumptions are challenged, however, and his gun is ultimately stolen and used to murder his own wife. Most gun owners feel safer because they are armed, but guns also add an additional element of danger and unpredictability to most situations. Bob and Doug view them differently, as do Red and Blue State Americans.



Doug (Aron Stanford) and the Beast prepare for battle against the mutants in *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006).

Given that the Blue State/Red State divide becomes the galvanizing debate of the film, in terms of its divided protagonists, it is not surprising that the American flag is one of the key symbols in Aja's *The Hills Have Eyes*.

When an American flag is featured in horror films it is utilized one of two ways, generally, in terms of theme.

It can be used sincerely, as a symbol of patriotism and an avatar of American values.

Or, as is more often the case, it is utilized ironically, to expose the gap between what America believes it stands for and what it often, actually, does stand for.

Accordingly, Old Glory appears throughout *The Hills Have Eyes* in provocative ways. It is seen on Bob's vehicle, but also on T-shirts. After the mutants attack the Carters, they seize the American flag, rebranding it for themselves (because, as much as they are monsters, they are also, we learn, Americans). And, in the final battle, Doug uses an American flag as a weapon, stabbing one of the mutants through the neck with Old Glory. There are many other instances too. An American flag decorates a miner's grave, for instance, at one point in the film.

The concept of "America" is thus at the heart of this remake in a way not so readily apparent, and not so thoroughly investigated in Craven's original picture.

What are the commonalities?

The flag is championed by right-wing gun owners, who have co-opted the patriotism for their world view. It is stolen in conflict. And, it becomes a tool of murder, finally (even in the hands, importantly of a Democrat: Doug). What the flag represents then—and what America represents by extension in this film—is violence; bloody, brutal violence.

The Hills Have Eyes also asks a question that has not really been addressed or answered in American culture, even in 2020.

Who owns the flag?

Do right-wing, gun-owning red staters own the flag, since they pride themselves on patriotism and sport bumper stickers declaring "*Support the troops!*"?

Or do left-wing blue staters own the flag, since they champion the ideal not necessarily of blind patriotism but of a more equal, just and fair, "more perfect" union for everyone?

Do the mutants—the revolutionaries waging an impossible war against a violent Empire (see: The American Revolution)—own the flag, even?

This film actually gets down to the nitty gritty concept of "*what is America?*" Or perhaps, "*who is America?*"

This theme, this "*capture the flag*" through-line that *The Hills Have Eyes* utilizes so effectively leads right back to the concept of blowback, which is crucial to any understanding of the 9/11 attacks and The Iraq War. What's important is that international players, tired of America's imperialist foreign policy and meddling in their affairs, had launched asymmetric warfare on the United States. *The Hills Have Eyes* recreates this concept, in microcosm, in the desert.



An imposing shot of the villainous Pluto (Michael Bailey Smith) in *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006).

As the film opens, the audience is informed that from the 1940s through the 1960s, the desert was used as a test site for nuclear weapons, by the American government. Again, there is an explicit connection between America and violence made by the filmmakers. Some of the denizens in that desert did not want to leave their homes. The government dropped the bombs anyway, and created the mutants, who then moved into one of the testing towns, a twisted reflection of 1950s American life.

However, this act by the American government generated blowback. As one of the mutant family members notes “*You destroyed our homes. You set off your bombs. You made us what we’ve become.*” The violent and intrusive actions of the U.S. Government “radicalized” a group of people, a family/a cell/a base (Al Qaeda?) and that group now attacks citizens such as the Carters. This film thus notes, no doubt controversially, that America planted the seeds for the 9/11 attack long before 9/11. The attack, like the

attack on the RV in the film, is blowback against “*American carnage*,” to coin a phrase.

What answers can *The Hills Have Eyes* provide American about where it has found itself in the 2000s? Well, the right-wing Republicans are lost at sea, killed by their own guns, and unable to rally any response but to pray in the face of danger and imminent death. They stick to some outmoded beliefs about prayer, and the use of bad language, which Mother chides her children about. One might say, only half-tongue-in-cheek, that they cling to their Bibles and guns, to appropriate the words of Barack Obama, and look where it gets them. The film views this philosophy as worthless. After the Republicans pray, the camera retracts so they appear smaller and smaller, until the audience realizes they are being watched by mutants with binoculars.

No one is going to answer their prayers.

As for Doug, the Democrat and liberals, he acts as violently and savagely to protect his family as do the mutants. When the veneer of civilization is ripped away, on one hand he proves he is not a “*fuckin’ pussy*,” but on the other hand proves that he is no less violent, no less brutal, no less monstrous than those he despises and disagrees with.

So, the red staters are deluded, ignorant and incapable, and the blue staters are hypocrites. It’s a caustic picture of America, circa 2006.

That seems to be the message, boiled down, of *The Hills Have Eyes*. The movie notes that it doesn’t matter how Americans divide themselves when their joined history is one bathed in blood and violence. Even the American pastime, baseball, gets a knock against it, as Doug uses a baseball bat to bludgeon the mutants.

Maybe it doesn’t really matter who was president, or which party was in the White House. The atom bomb was dropped in the name of all Americans. The War on Terror was the official response of our entire country. The original *The Hills Have Eyes* was about the haves vs. the have nots. The remake is about the battle for an “ownership” of America that was, is, and will continue to be violent. This theme is brought to its pinnacle when a mutant takes up the lyrics of the Star-Spangled Banner, America’s National Anthem.

In terms of its adherence to road-trip terror tropes, it is fair to state that this film’s source material, the Craven picture, pioneered many of them. But the remake features such symbol as the Last Chance Gas station (the borderlands), the lost and found belonging room (here a crater filled with cast-off cars, from victims), and the isolation from technology (cell phones don’t operate). And, of course, the terrain of the battlefield is geographically cut-off from the society at large. In this case, in the year 2006, the desert setting can’t help but conjure images of the Iraq desert. Or on a more general scale, the Middle East.

The original Craven film was quite gruesome and intense, but politely put, the remake ramps up that intensity by a factor of ten. One might argue you can’t make a film about our history of violence without featuring violence, and that seems to be Aja’s credo. The film moves deftly from transgressive terror to transgressive terror. Even though the murder of the family (and rape, and torture...) was featured in the original film, it feels even more raw and edgy here. Of all Aja’s films, this remake works the best because it updates the original film with even more gruesome violence, and finds a new, but relevant theme upon which to hang the bloody tale.

The Hills Have Eyes finds the sweet spot for remakes: it’s scary, smart, familiar, and different enough, in all the right, lunatic proportions.

I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer (DTV) * 1/2

Cast & Crew

CAST: Brooke Nevin (Amber Williams); David Paetikan (Colby Patterson); Torrey DeVitto (Zoe); Ben Easter (Lance); Seth Packard (Roger); K.C. Clyde (Deputy Hafner); Michael Flynn (Sheriff Davis); Clayton Taylor (P.J.); Brittany Leary (Kim); Star Le Pointe (Kelly); Don Shanks (The Fisherman).

CREW: Destination Films, Origin Film and Sony Pictures Home Entertainment presents *I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer*. Casting: Shawn Dawson, Judi McKee. Production Designer: Eric Weller. Music: Justin Burnett. Costume Designer: Amy Jean Roberts. Director of Photography: Stephen M. Katz. Film Editor: David Chacel. Based on characters created by: Lois Duncan. Written by: Michael Weiss. Directed by: Sylvain White. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Broken Ridge, Colorado, a group of high schoolers spend July 4 scaring each other with stories of the slasher known as the Fisherman. The killer with a hook for a hand promptly reappears at a carnival and starts murdering people, but it is all revealed to be part of a prank. One year later, the same teens start receiving messages that someone knows what they did last summer, and the prank the conspirators—Zoe (DeVitto), Amber (Nevin), Roger (Packard) and Colby (Roger)—pulled on the unsuspecting locals. Now, it seems, the real Fisherman is back, and haunting the teens for their moral trespass.

COMMENTARY: Featuring little suspense, no real innovation, and a listless pace, the direct-to-video *I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer* is a death-knell to the neo-slasher franchise that began with such a blast in 1997. This is the first sequel in the franchise to feature a setting change (from an Eastern fishing town to Colorado), and not include protagonists or actors from the 1997 original. Though a new location and new teens might have breathed life into the slasher film the third time around, the tiresome repetition of all the plot elements of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* makes the film a slog to get through. The one word that seems to best describe the film is “*exhausted*.” The pacing is lethargic, and the action anemic.

The same moral questions of the original are raised again in *I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer*, only a decade later, and with updated pop culture references. The teens pull a prank that sees one of their friends, P.J., get killed ... impaled on a tractor.

The offending teens make a pact and decide not to go to the police or ever speak of what they've done. They shirk responsibility, and one young person does it for an updated 2000s motive, even. They believe they will be the next "*American Idol*," and don't want to lose that opportunity.

Other than this kowtow to the reality TV Age, the film follows the format of the original film slavishly, featuring the crime, the anniversary of the crime, a show in which things will go horribly wrong, a red herring, a townie, and of course, the Fisherman. Watching *I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer*, the killer certainly appears to be supernatural for the first time. He is apparently the same Fisherman who has been killed twice before and was featured in earlier entries. Now he just goes around killing kids with secrets, apparently, but how he should learn those secrets is a question best not asked.

The *Friday the 13th* films ultimately turned Jason into a supernatural slasher too, when he was revived by lightning, in *Jason Lives*, so the idea of making the Fisherman a kind of immortal avatar for vengeance makes sense. The problem is that the idea isn't applied in any sort of intelligent or consistent fashion.

By 2006, the horror genre had moved well-past the neo-slasher movement that gave birth to this franchise, so it is strange to see a low-grade but slavish sequel attempt to bring everything back with no new wrinkles. There are no great performances here, no memorable scares, and no significant development of a franchise mythology.

Instead of a new beginning, this film is a low-grade epitaph for a series that had seen better days. These days, people never know there was a second sequel to *Last Summer*.

The Mangler Reborn (DTV) zero stars

Cast & Crew

CAST: Aimee Brooks (Jamie); Reggie Bannister (Rick); Weston Blakesley (Hadley); Scott Speiser (Mike); Juliana Dever (Louise Watson); Sarah Lilly (Beatrice Watson); Renee Dorian (Gwen); Rhett Giles (Sean); Jeff Burr (Lawnmowing Man).

CREW: Lion Gate Films, Barnholtz Entertainment, Assembly Line Studios, MEB Entertainment and Mangler Reborn Productions LLC presents *The Mangler Reborn*. Production Designers: Stephen Noriega, Sam Spadino. Costume Design: Heather Chaffee. Special Effects: Evolution Effects Studio. Music: Climax Golden Twins. Director of Photography: Thaddeus Wadleigh. Film Editing: Matthew Cassel. Producers: Mark Burman, Scott Pearlman. Executive Producer: Barry Barnholtz. Written and Directed by: Erik Gardner, and Matt Cunningham. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A man named Hadley (Blakesley) is possessed by an antique, cursed, industrial laundry machine which he purchased on E-Bay. He goes on a brutal murder spree and feeds his victims to the machine. Meanwhile, a thief and his son break into the house, where a young woman is being held hostage, for future sacrifice. Hadley returns home and goes after the thieves.

COMMENTARY: When a horror franchise starts at a pretty low-quality threshold (see: *The Mangler* [1995]), one must wonder how low the series can go.

The Mangler Reborn answers that question.

It is a terrible movie that is poorly acted, poorly plotted and utterly stupid. The first scene, featuring Hadley and his wife Beatrice at the dinner table, as Beatrice complains that the "*bills are piling up*" and that he spent his life savings on the laundry machine, is so poorly performed and shot that it staggers the imagination.

Who in the world thought this was a strong way to begin the film?

Most of *The Mangler Reborn* occurs in Hadley's house, though he does venture out to procure other victims, especially if the film senses the opportunity for a leering shower scene. The movie is also

excessively bloody, which isn't a problem, but everything looks cheap, and fake. In terms of the plot, one has to wonder why *The Mangler* decided to adopt the style of the latter-day *Amityville* movies, resurrecting a cursed antique, basically and making it the source of horror. In this case, the brand name *Mangler* mostly feels slapped on, since the movie, from its opening title card, desires to be more about demonic possession than evil laundry machines.

There's not much else to write about this one, except it's a shame to see Reggie Bannister fronting such terrible, amateurish material. The second film, while running far afield of the original *The Mangler*, was at least a professional looking film ... mostly. This one is a disaster. To quote the movie: "*Fuck you, and fuck your machine.*"

By the way, the rejoinder to that curse in the movie is "*I am the machine.*" If only *The Mangler Reborn* were as efficient as one.

Mr. Jingles (DTV) zero stars

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kelli Jensen (Angie Randall); Jessica Hall (Heidi); John Anton (Stranger); Nathaniel Ketcham (Dylan); Karen Turner (Angie's Mother); Dave Cunningham (Mr. Randall); Dr. Rudolph C. Hatfield (Mr. Jingles); Chris Peters (Bill Guinness); Tom Reeser (Mayor Baines); John Manthei (Dr. Rudolph); Heather Doba (Melanie Guinness).

CREW: Lion's Gate, Crossbow 5 Entertainment, and Prison Cell Present *Mr. Jingles*. Director of Cinematography: Mauri S. Boy Music: James Souva, T.J. Film Editing: Todd Brunswick, Leo Pacman. Special Effects: Brian Manthel, Keith Faychak, Division Six SPFX. Executive Producers: Todd Brunswick, Tommy Brunswick, Rudy Hatfield. Producer: Todd Brunswick, Tommy Brunswick. Written by: Todd Brunswick. Directed by: Todd Brunswick. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 73 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A crazed clown, Mr. Jingles (Hatfield), goes on a killing spree in suburbia. Seven years later, the only survivor of that massacre, Angie Randall (Jensen), is released from a mental hospital with PTSD, still terrified of the clown's return. Mr. Jingles returns, the victim of a conspiracy and frame-up, to kill again and again. He attacks Angie, but also pursues those who wronged him seven years earlier.

COMMENTARY: There's no polite way to write it: *Mr. Jingles* is a non-professional film.

Readers should not misunderstand the remark. This description is not a comment on the film's entirely absent artistry. It is a comment on the film's quality in general, which is difficult to hear, wretchedly acted (presumably by the director's friends), and poorly shot.

It seems almost unfair to review *Mr. Jingles* in the context of this book given the fact that it looks like a school project, or a young director's fledgling and earnest attempt to make his first (no budget) movie, marshaling all the local resources he can.

But the fact is that the film got a major DVD release, has been reviewed on several horror web sites, and yet it routinely and thoroughly stinks. About the nicest thing one can say about this amateur film is that an attempt was made.

Barely feature length at 73 minutes, *Mr. Jingles* relies on the lowest common denominator, a presumed audience fear of clowns. The character of Mr. Jingles is never built up to seem terrifying; rather, the fact that he is a clown committing bloody murder is left to do all the heavy lifting. The film is a series of brutal murders, poorly composed, of characters whom the audience has little invested in, or doesn't know. They are mostly revelers at a party, ready-made fodder for the clown massacre. The film opens with bloody murder, and the presence of the clown in the opening shots, so Mr. Jingles is not a

haunting, off-stage presence, generating suspense about his next appearance, or victim. Instead, he's right up front, and any feelings of fear surrounding him are lost.

The most intriguing aspect of the film is likely the conspiracy angle, the idea that the town mayor and police knew the truth about Mr. Jingles (and his innocence or guilt) and conspired to hide the truth. Seven years later, they get their comeuppance for their complicity in his misery. In the decade of 9/11, this seems like a timely plot detail, since as the decade wore on 9/11 Truthers came to believe that that it was the American government, and not foreign terrorists, who brought down the Twin Towers. There is no overt reference to 9/11 in the film, make no mistake—that would be giving *Mr. Jingles* too much credit—but the idea of a conspiracy fitting in as the slasher “crime in the past,” gives the film a post-2000 feel, for certain.

Mr. Jingles also plays on the very 2000s idea of PTSD. America itself had PTSD in this decade, thanks to 9/11 in particular, and many horror films of the aughts linger on characters who have suffered a trauma, like Angie in *Mr. Jingles*, and can't shake it.

Again, this is a new facet of an old and familiar formula. Many final girls, in slasher films, survived their first encounter with a “monster,” only to endure continuing PTSD; something to prevent them from carrying on meaningfully with their lives, and setting the stage for another encounter.

Perhaps *Mr. Jingles* would feel more welcome had it not been given a DVD release, but just uploaded to YouTube circa 2009 or so for free consumption. Then, the film would have felt like something discovered or “found,” and an example of the way consumers were becoming prosumers in the Web 2.0 Age, generating their own content to share with like-minded enthusiasts.

Instead, hiding under the greasepaint of DVD and promising to be a real movie with a real plot, real characters, and decent pacing, *Mr. Jingles* is a horrible disappointment, and sparks anger over its amateur nature.

Mortuary (DTV) * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Dan Byrd (Jonathan); Denise Crosby (Leslie); Stephanie Patton (Jamie); Alexandra Adi (Liz); Rocky Marquette (Grady); Courtney Peldon (Tina); Bur Hall (Cal); Tarah Paige (Sarah) Michael Shamus Wiles (Sheriff Howell); Adam Gierasch (Mr. Barstow); Price Carson (Bobby Fowler); Lee Garlington (Rita); Greg Travis (Eliot Cook); Christy Johnson (Dottie).

CREW: Echo Bridge Entertainment, in association D & K Screen Fund I presents *Mortuary*. Casting: Mark Sikes. Production Designer: Rob Howeth. Costume Designer: Shawnelle Cherry. Special Effects: Ultimate Effects, Krypton Visual Effects. Music: Joseph Conlan. Director of Photography: Jaron Presant. Film Editor: Andrew Cohen. Producers: Tony DiDio, E.L. Katz, Peter Katz. Executive Producers: Michael Alexander, Douglas L. Hamilton, Michael Rosenblatt, Lucie Salhany. Written by: Jace Anderson, Adam Gierasch. Directed by: Tobe Hooper. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Following the death of her husband, Leslie Doyle (Crosby) moves with her children, Jonathan (Byrd) and Jamie (Patton), into a dilapidated, rotting mortuary, where she hopes to start a career as a mortician. The family doesn't realize it yet, but also living in the Fowler Mortuary is Bobby Fowler (Carson), a figure who has been infected by a quickly spreading black fungus which transforms normal people into crazed murderers. The black fungus moves into the house, spreading to Leslie, and jeopardizing the children.

COMMENTARY: Tobe Hooper's *Mortuary* is a mixed bag of tricks and treats, unfortunately. As is

always the case with this director, the film magnificently establishes a sense of place, and—in certain sequences—boldly goes further than audience comfort zones in depicting horror scenarios. Alas, those virtues are mitigated here by a campy, uneven tone, and some make-up special effects that don't hold up to scrutiny.

Mortuary starts strong. It starts so strong, in fact, that it looks, in its opening scenes to be a return to masterpiece territory for Hooper. The film introduces a family that has suffered a tragedy (the death of the patriarch) and then sends that family into a wreck of a new life, a funeral home/mortuary that is more than mere fixer upper. In short order, the audience sees brown water coming from the faucets, a filthy sink, a weird old chapel, a makeshift, half-repaired front porch, and pools of ick in the front yard. The message is clear that this family is downwardly mobile. This set-up is a perfect book end to Hooper's "yuppie" classic *Poltergeist* (1982), which concerned the upwardly mobile Freelings, who discovered the hard way that there are no spiritual shortcuts when trying to get rich; at least none that don't cost something. The idea in *Mortuary*, of a family falling out of the middle class because of a tragedy, for instance the death of a parent and loss of their income, is one very relevant to the 2000s. This was a period of stagnant wages for the middle class, skyrocketing health-care costs, and tax cuts for the wealthy. In other words, it was the eighties redux, with the middle class squeezed and shrinking, while deficits ballooned.

In addition to its relevant and timely set-up, *Mortuary* displays Hooper's "no deal" aesthetic, as described by poet L.M. Kit Carson in the 1980s. That aesthetic means simply that Hooper takes things to the edge of taboo and transgression, and then crosses that line again and again. In other words, the deal with the audience that it will not be upset by what it sees is shattered. The audience stands back and implores, in 2000s vernacular, "*don't go there*," but, inevitably, Hooper goes there. Again, this is a perfect fit for the 2000s, an age of gore and violence, courtesy of torture porn. The scene in *Mortuary* that most closely fits this aesthetic involves Leslie's first attempt to embalm a corpse, that of a piano teacher. The operation goes horribly wrong, and the word messy is not a suitable adjective to describe it.

An admirer of Tobe Hooper can enjoy his expertise setting up the film's settings, the way the narrative reflects his film canon, particularly *Poltergeist*, and his go-for-broke, transgressive approach to the material. The subterranean world beneath the mortuary, Hooper aficionados, will realize, looks like a call-back to the Sawyer family digs in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986), and that's a fun touch too.

And yet, frankly, *Mortuary* still fails to impress, overall. After an intriguing first act, which also involves a colorful local sheriff warning Denise Crosby about the dangers of "*graveyard babies*" (teenagers having sex in the cemetery behind the mortuary), everything just goes off the rails. The black fungus infects everything and creates an atmosphere of deranged madness that, alas, is not terrifying, just campy and uneven. The make-up for the monsters is not very good, and the fungus looks painted on in some scenes ... with spray paint. The film's jolts and jump scares are poorly orchestrated too. Finally, the CGI in the film is—*wait for it*—terrible. The idea that salt destroys the fungus is fine but is executed in a way that seems silly.

Finally, the resolution that sees Leslie, the matriarch, die, is totally unsatisfying since audiences have invested in her new life, and her family. Now her children have lost both parents. What will they do?

In a movie with a tone this silly and campy, to end on that down note is downright odd. Again, this dark fate reflects realities of the 2000s: nobody's getting out unscathed! Survival costs an arm and a leg, or a loved one. But it feels wrong for *Mortuary*, especially as the death hardly seems important to the movie's climax.

Mortuary is unique and weird, with spiky moments of genuine interest, but it's also a total bust in terms of scares and execution at times.

The Omen 6 6 6 * * *

Critical Reception

“...glossy and well-packaged.”—Xan Brooks, *The Guardian*, June 2, 2006, page 12.

“The only reason this film seems to exist—aside from the obvious monetary desires—is so the filmmakers can try to recreate the 1976 supernatural thriller shot for shot.”—Jeff Vice, *Deseret Morning News*: “*Omen* remake cranks up the gore,” June 6, 2006m page CO8.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Liev Schreiber (Robert Thorn); Julia Stiles (Katherine Thorn); David Thewlis (Keith Jennings); Seamus Davey-Fitzpatrick (Damien); Pete Postlethwaite (Father Brennan); Mia Farrow (Mrs. Baylock); Michael Gambon (Bugenhausen); Carlo Sabatini (Cardinal Fabretti); Bohumil Svarc (Pope); Giovanni Lombardo Radice (Father Stiletto); Tomas Wooler (Damien at 2); Amy Huck (Nanny); Reggie Austin (Tom Portman); Janet Henfrey (Mrs. Horton); Richard Rees (Psychiatrist Hugh Greer).

CREW: Twentieth Century-Fox presents *The Omen 6 6 6*. Casting: Susie Figgis. Costume Designer: George L. Little. Production Designer: Patrick Lumb. Music: Marco Beltrami. Special Effects: Cinesite, CosFX, 11:11 Mediaworks. Director of Photography: Jonathan Sela. Film Editor: Dan Zimmerman. Producers: John Moore, Glenn Williamson. Executive Producers: David Harfield, Jeffrey Stott. Written by: David Seltzer. Directed by: John Moore. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 110 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After Robert Thorn’s (Schreiber) son is born dead, he secretly adopts a child, with the help of the Catholic Church, to fool his depressive wife, Katherine (Stiles). Years later, Thorn becomes the Ambassador to Great Britain and his adopted son, Damien (Davey-Fitzpatrick) seems surrounded by accidental death and evil. Thorn learns that Damien may, in fact, be the Anti-Christ.

COMMENTARY: David Seltzer’s chilling tale about the Anti-Christ among us, *The Omen*, endures. The bicentennial year original spawned two theatrical sequels, this re-make and has even been remade as a TV movie called *The Omen: The Awakening*. At its core, this durable franchise concerns a very deep-seated parental fear. It meditates on the notion that your child, that little cherub you love so much, is not what he or she seems. Underneath the angelic smile are dark intentions, or worse, pure evil. The concept of the film, about a changeling—a switcheroo between babies—also reflects the not uncommon terror that the child that you believe is yours is actually someone else’s progeny. If you’re a parent, you know that can be potent nightmare fodder.



Damien, the Anti-Christ (Seamus Davey-Fitzpatrick), is born in *The Omen 6 6 6* (2006).

The original 1976 version of *The Omen* was a good film. It starred Gregory Peck and Lee Remick as the unwitting, unsuspecting parents of that little tyke, Damien, the growing Anti-Christ. The film also featured a stellar supporting cast that included Patrick Troughton, Leo McKern and David Warner. Perhaps more memorably, the film thrived on its intense and graphic violence. Anyone who has seen the film won't soon forget the plate glass decapitation sequence. Later films in the *Omen* cycle (1978's *Damien: Omen II* and 1981's *The Final Conflict*) came to rely more strongly on these violent set-pieces than upon characterization or internal consistency, but the original was a potent nightmare. Like *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist*, it was a brilliant crystallization of parental fears about children.

So along comes this Hollywood remake, with Liev Schreiber in the Peck role, as Ambassador Robert Thorn, and Julia Stiles as his prone-to-depression wife. In a bit of stunt casting that works

splendidly, Mia Farrow (Rosemary herself) plays the evil Nanny, Ms. Baylock. This is supremely ironic casting not merely because of Farrow's association with the famous Polanski devil-baby film, but because of her own tumultuous personal history with Woody Allen and the tug of war the duo fought over their adopted children. Here, with a straight face, Farrow speaks lines such as "*caring for children has been the joy of my life.*" This adds a nice little bit of campiness to a mostly dour picture.



Ms. Thorn (Julia Stiles) hangs on for dear life in *The Omen 666*.

Omen 666 is also a beautifully shot production. Despite Ms. Farrow's campy presence, it's less kitschy, exploitative and fun than the 1970s version, and is in every way possible a product of its context, the early 21st century. This means that the production values are absolutely, utterly sterling. There's perfect lighting, a menacing soundtrack, and the colors are rich and vibrant. The reds are redder, the

blues steeler and the gold as shiny as gold can possibly be. No expense has been spared to make the film lovely.

The cast is “A” list all the way too, and Seltzer’s screenplay moves with supreme confidence. And so it should, since this is essentially a light rewrite. But back to the supporting cast: Michael Gambon has replaced Leo McKern, Pete Postlethwaite has taken the role of the doomed priest originally played by Troughton, and David Thewlis subs for David Warner as the curious photographer. Those are all fair trades.

Finally, the death scenes here are clever, ruthless mousetraps. A sequence of unlikely events, like a hammer falling from a roof, cause bloody deaths, and it’s impressively filmed. *The Omen* films were doing this kind of thing before *Final Destination* made them fashionable again.

I realize this is likely sacrilege, but I also prefer Liev Schreiber in the role of the ambassador. The late Gregory Peck is a terrific actor, but his gravitas often translates on screen as CERTAINTY. He’s a stolid, dependable fellow; the hero type. It’s hard to feel that he’s ever truly in danger, or physically jeopardized, and his casting in the original film often worked against the enterprise. Liev Schreiber is a different breed all together, a little weaselly, a little wussy, and thus more human and recognizable as one of us. He expresses more emotions in the role than Peck did, and that’s a good thing. In some senses, this *Omen* feels more immediate and heart-wrenching because of his performance.

Schreiber gets a great scene when he discovers that his son—his real son—was murdered and tossed thoughtlessly into a grave. His expression—his breakdown—perfectly captures the feelings of loss his character feels at that moment, as well as the regret over being a part of the “conspiracy” that killed the baby.

What the new *Omen* lacks—besides the warm glow of nostalgia we apply to all our favorite 1970s—is any real sense of surprise, innovation or inspiration. This is pretty much a note-by-note remake of the ’76 film, but with a bigger budget and more remarkable production values. I don’t know that those improvements are enough to merit the remake of a classic.

Some modifications have been made to be sure. The destruction of the twin towers on 9/11, the space shuttle *Columbia* disaster and the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina have now been added to the prophecy that heralds the birth of the Devil’s Child, for example. This makes the movie feel timely again, and I particularly enjoyed the notion that the Anti-Christ rises in the world of politics (a sea of politics, the film suggests), and in the process separates man from his brother. In the 2000s blue state/red state divide, this passage reads as more relevant than ever. No doubt the Anti-Christ thinks he’s a uniter, not a divider, but I’ll trust the Church’s prophecy on that one.

In the years to come, I suspect that it will be the original *The Omen* that continues to get the most play. This remake isn’t terrible. It was better than I thought it would be, actually, thanks mostly to Schreiber.

It’s also true that if you’ve seen the first *Omen*, you probably have no compelling reason to see this one unless you’re just looking for a very slight variation on a theme.

Open Water 2: Adrift (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Susan May Pratt (Amy); Richard Speight, Jr. (James); Niklaus Lange (Zach); Eric Dane (Dan); Ali Hills (Lauren); Cameron Richardson (Michelle); Wolfgang Raach (Amy’s Father); Mattea and Luca Gabaretti (Sara).

CREW: Summit Entertainment, Orange Pictures, and Shotgun Pictures in association with Peter Rommel Films present *Open Water 2: Adrift*. Casting: Nancy Naylor, Kelly Wagner. Production Designer: Frank Godt. Director of Photography: Bernhard Jasper. Music: Gerd Baumann. Film Editor: Christian Lonk. Executive Producer: Stephan Barth. Producers: Dan Maag, Philip Schulz-Deyle. Written by: Adam Kreutner, Collin McMahon, David Mitchell, Richard Speight, Jr. Directed by: Hans Horn. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94

SYNOPSIS: A group of friends get together to vacation for the first time in five years. Amy (Pratt) and her husband, James (Speight), have a new baby, Sara (Gabaretta), and Amy's old flame, Dan (Dane), has apparently hit it big. Together, they and Zach (Lange), Michelle (Richardson), and Lauren (Hills) will be partying on Dan's expensive yacht. Once at sea, however, everyone except the napping baby goes into the water for a swim, but nobody remembers to lower a ladder over the side. Before long, everyone realizes they can't re-board the yacht, and they are trapped in the water. Multiple attempts to climb the boat's slippery hull fail, even as Amy begins to respond fearfully, based on memories of her father drowning, years earlier.

COMMENTARY: *Open Water 2: Drift* is a surprisingly effective and worthwhile follow-up to the brilliant and disturbing, micro-budgeted *Open Water* (2004). This time, there are no sharks to reckon with in the water—an ambitious creative choice for a horror movie—only a sea-going yacht that can't be re-boarded, because the irresponsible vacationers have neglected to lower a ladder over the side. The bulk of the film is spent with the acrimonious adults shivering, trapped in the water (and a baby alone in her cabin) and desperately attempting to climb up the hull of the ship, but with no real tools or help, doing so.

This simple and yet oddly plausible scenario creates a tantalizing dilemma. Safety aboard the ship is just feet away, yet entirely impossible to reach. Visually, the boat is prominent in the frame throughout the film, a symbolic reminder of how close sanctuary stands, and yet how far it truly remains for those trapped in the ocean. The movie feels real to the extent that it is all premised on, simply, human error, and the domino effect that follows one, grave but simple mistake.

The characters in this sequel are a little bit shallower and off-the-shelf than those the audience met in the first *Open Water*, and yet not entirely unsympathetic. Amy is married with a new baby, yet still carries a torch for Dan, and he reciprocates those feelings. Meanwhile, Dan is insecure about himself, and hides a secret about the yacht, and the success it ostensibly represents. Amy possesses the familiar or canned "fear of drowning" trope, brought on by the drowning death of her father some years earlier, and this character background is the least successful aspect of the film. A movie about random fate, and human error, loses something vital if it tries too hard to chart a "destiny" for a character like Amy, tying together her childhood and possible fate. The movie simply doesn't need to depict anything so patently artificial as a character overcoming her lifelong fear of drowning to make it compelling.

The American flag hangs proudly from the yacht, *Godspeed*, in the film, and anytime an American flag is seen so prominently in a post-9/11 film, one must, in due diligence, wonder if the filmmakers are using the Stars and Stripes to make a deeper point. *Open Water 2: Drift*, is an enjoyable and harrowing horror film without attempting to read any post-9/11 metaphor or undercurrent in it, but permit me a thought experiment for a moment, anyway.

The film is sub-titled "adrift," which some might say is a good description of America's foreign policy in Iraq after the invasion and fall of Baghdad in 2003. Furthermore, all the action in the film results from the (American) characters making an unforced mistake: failing to lower the ladder, so swimmers can re-board the yacht. Again, many scholars and citizens consider the invasion of Iraq an unforced error: the commitment of American blood and treasure to occupy a country that had not attacked the United States and furthermore did not even boast the capacity to do so.

Other unforced errors in the Iraq War? Allowing looters to steal Iraq's treasures, once American forces were in control. Firing the Baathists in the Iraqi military after combat operations, thus leading to an insurgency, and so forth. And then, of course, is the reckoning, at the end of the film, that Dan doesn't really own the yacht at all. He's lied about the whole thing and has been incompetent in its operation since the very start of the film. Of course, many in America feel lied to by the administration about the cost of the war, the reasons for the war, and even the reception American soldiers would face

in Iraq (“we’ll be greeted as liberators.”)

All this is simply meant to suggest that *Open Water 2: Drift* could function as a metaphor for America and its foreign policy circa 2006, as President Bush’s popularity began to decline. The happy “surface” story is not exactly the truth. Things in the Iraqi War, and on *Godspeed*, do not, shall we say, go swimmingly. Why? It’s a movie about a costly mistake that, no matter the options, isn’t easy to escape from. “I’m afraid. I’m nothing ... for once I just wanted to believe in myself,” Dan admits, after his carefully-constructed “appearance” of success (i.e., campaign of lies) has collapsed. Many Americans wanted to believe too but were left in an expensive quagmire.

Even Amy’s history ties into this reading in a way. The Iraq War proved, definitively, that modern America had forgotten the lessons of the Vietnam War. Amy’s past (the death of her father) seems to represent Vietnam, and her encounter with danger in the ocean, a generation later, a repeat of the same mistake, much like the Iraq War.

Obviously one can dismiss this reading, but it’s odd how all the elements fit together. A horror movie about simple human error, in the post-9/11 age, resonates more deeply than anyone would expect from a cookie-cutter sequel.

LEGACY: A third *Open Water* film was released more than a decade later, in 2017.

Pulse ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“...this updated version all but obscures the original film’s meditation on the agony of loneliness, glossing over its argument that modern communication technology isolates us rather than drawing people together.”—James Dyer, *Empire*, August 26, 2006.

“I wouldn’t call it, as most of my contemporaries have, a complete failure.”—Debi Moore, *Dread Central*, last retrieved October 21, 2006.

“Viewers and critics have been particularly harsh with *Pulse*, and I think it’s because the film is ultimately so bleak. From frame one, it places us in a drab, depressing world much like the J-horror remake *Dark Water* (2005). Both of these films create a thoroughly pervasive atmosphere of dread, and establish death as a constant, crushing, unavoidable force in our lives.”—Joseph Maddrey, *Classic Horror*, February 2, 2008.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kristen Bell (Mattie); Dexter (Ian Somerhalder); Christina Millan (Isabelle Fuentes); Rick Gonzalez (Stone); Jonathan Tucker (Josh); Sam Levine (Tim); Octavia Spencer (Landlady); Ron Rifkin (Dr. Waterson); Joseph Gatt (Dark Figure); Kel O’Neill (Douglas Ziegler); Zach Genier (Professor Cardiff); Riki Lindhome (Janelle); John Burke (Newscaster); Mike Regan (Phantom).

CREW: Dimension Films, The Weinstein Company, Distant Horizon and Neo Art & Logic present *Pulse*. Casting: Floriela Grapini, Monika Mikkelsen, Mary Vernieu. Production Designers: Ermanno Di Febo-Orsini, Gary B. Matteson. Special Effects: Two Hours in the Dark, Neo Digital, Light Dog Films, Live Wire Productions, Engine Room, C-TRL Labs, I.C.O. Entertainment, The Orphanage. Music: Ella Cmiral. Director of Photography: Mark Plummer. Film Editors: Robert K. Lambert, Kirk Morri. Producer: Brian Cox, Michael Leahy, Anant Singh, Joel Soisson. Executive Producers: Vlad Paunescu, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. Based on *Kairo* by: Kiyoshi Kurosawa. Written by: Wes Craven and Ray Wright. Directed by: Jim Sonzero. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A college student, Mattie (Bell), worries about her sometimes boyfriend, Josh (Tucker), who has been out-of-touch of late. When she visits his apartment, Josh commits suicide before her very eyes, and she is traumatized. Soon, an epidemic of suicides plagues the campus and the city. Mattie attempts to track down Josh’s computer hard-drive and learns that it has been purchased by man named Dexter (Somerhalder), who puts some of the pieces together. Before his death, Josh had hacked

the computer, a telecommunications expert named Zeiglar, who developed a new frequency to transmit huge torrents of information: a super wide-band frequency. Unfortunately, the ghoulish spirits of the Dead can piggyback on this revolutionary carrier wave and squeeze back into our world. Once back on the mortal coil, they promptly suck the life out of the living, stealing that which we cherish the most: life itself. As society collapses, and everyone with a computer or cell phone is devoured by the restless spirits, Dexter and Mattie attempt to upload a virus that will shut down the telecommunications system. But it is too late to undo the damage, and the apocalypse arrives, with surviving humans forced to huddle in satellite “dead zones” where cell phone and Wi-Fi transmissions cannot touch them.

COMMENTARY: What if all the devices of modern convenience of 21st-century life, such as cell phones, I-Pods, or laptop computers with broadband Internet, are actually the gateway to pure evil? That’s the premise of the horror film *Pulse*, another remake of a popular Japanese genre film, in this case, *Kairo* (2001). The American film, co-written by Wes Craven and Ray Wright and directed by Jim Sonzero, suggests that the very tools people use to connect with others only isolate them, taking away pieces of the soul a huge chunk at a time.

Not unlike *The Ring* (2002), the conceit underlining *Pulse* is that Evil can spread to millions of innocent folks quickly, and that there need be no reason or rhyme to the pattern of widespread infection. Anyone with Internet access, a cell phone or digital cable may suffer. This J-Horror breed of film is all about two key notions. First, the J-horror remake genre concerns user discomfort with rapidly advancing technology, and the widespread broadcast of pain, misery and tragedy. Secondly, these films ask if there could be a karmic or supernatural price for these widely seen horrors? *What do such things do to the “global” human psyche?*

Pulse goes even further, however, and suggests that living a life of electronic connection actually destroys the will to exist in our own world. Accordingly, such “online” life leaves this world an abandoned, untended, rotting place. This fact is reflected in the film’s metallic color palette, and in images of a world with rotting infrastructure and much organic decay.

Pulse’s central tenet is a critique of the online or “connected” world of the Web 2.0 Age. Following *Pulse’s* opening credits, for example, the film cuts to frequent insert shots of students walking on campus playing with laptops, talking on cell phones, and snapping digital pictures. The idea made explicit by this imagery is that technology is ubiquitous, and therefore the perfect avenue for an invasion. As a culture, people have turned attention away from nature and reality, to this new cyber world of the Net. Accordingly, much of the film’s visual palette also seems to exist in the half-world of flickering fluorescent lights, which makes sense. It’s as though the audience is gazing at a computer screen in the dark half of the time. The form thus echoes the film’s content nicely. The world is becoming increasingly ugly-looking, and that ugliness stems from the invasion of the “other world” but also the lack of attention given this one.

For example, almost every location in *Pulse* looks filthy. Mattie finds rotting food in Josh’s refrigerator. She also stumbles upon a rotting, dying cat, actually, in one of his closets. These discoveries suggest that Josh—his soul now robbed by the online “spirits”—has forsaken all interest in this world. He doesn’t care to eat. He doesn’t even care for his pet cat. Once consumed, literally, by the denizens of the Net, the here and now on Earth mean nothing to him. And unfortunately, this kind of obsession with the digital realm is not merely limited to movies. It happens in real life too, such as the case of a couple in South Korea that spent so much time online—tending to a virtual baby—that their real-life, biological baby died of malnourishment. *Pulse* comments on that very dynamic and has done so prophetically. This leitmotif is given voice, again, in the description of life on Earth after being consumed by the digital world. “*They take your will to live,*” states one zombie-like character. “*You’re a shell. Your body dies right out from under you.*” *Pulse* is thus a horror allegory for people who spend too much time online, but shirk real life relationships and real life responsibilities doing so, and with ultimately, nothing to show for it. The answer, according to *Pulse* (rather amusingly): “*dispose of your technology!*”

What many reviewers have tagged as *Pulse*'s weakness, a kind of fever-edited—nay *hyper-edited*—visualization, actually reinforces the content too. Everything seems to happen at the lightning-fast speed of information transmission, and there's always a new scene demanding attention, even when one might like to further mine a scene already in progress. What tethers the movie, perhaps, is a series of repetitive shots of Mattie's campus. Little by little, it grows abandoned, as our world dies, and these shots help to establish the timing and progression of the invasion. Finally, the film rises to a fever pitch during an apocalyptic and surprisingly effective conclusion. There's a spectacular shot of a jet airliner crashing into a building as it is overcome by ghosts, and this is a beautiful and adroitly executed vista for a small budget horror (though it also featured in the Japanese original).

And then the end of the world arrives. It isn't averted by a hoary “happy” ending, and *Pulse* doesn't cop out with a cheap way of stopping the invasion. The main characters attempt to upload an anti-invasion virus into a server mainframe at the college computer center, but the Dead circumvent the plan. The die is cast. The “survivors” are left with no choice but to flee to America's “dead zones,” those few places out in the wilderness that don't get cell phone signals. As it winds to its shattering denouement, *Pulse* makes audiences contemplate the end of cities; the end of urban American, and the end of “connected” civilization. It's ironic that the “dead zones” of no Wi-Fi are the only place where natural life can grow.

Then again, perhaps that irony is the movie's point.

This movie got terrible review, but its form mirrors its content, and it is on “the pulse” of an ever-more connected world. It's an opportunity to question that world, briefly, before the next attention-sucking technology ascends.

Rest Stop (DTV) * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jaimie Alexander (Nicole); Joey Mendicino (Jesse Hilts); Deanna Russo (Tracy Kress); Diane Louise Salinger (The Mother); Michael Childers (The Father); Curtis Taylor (The Ranger); Joey Lawrence (Deacon); Gary Entin, Edmund Entin (Twins); Jennifer Cormack (College Student); Mikey Post (Scotty).

CREW: Warner Home Video and Raw Feed present in association with Papazian-Hirsch Entertainment and Flame Ventures, *Rest Stop*. Casting: Patrick Baca, Robin Nassif. Production Designer: Philip Dagort. Costume Designer: Warden Neil. Special Effects: Level 3 Post. Music: Bear McCreary. Director of Photography: Mark Vargo. Film Editor: Richard Byard. Producers: Tony Krantz, Daniel Myrick, Shawn Papazian, John Shibana. Executive Producers: James G. Hirsch, R.J. Louis, Robert A. Papazian. Written and Directed by: John Shibana. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 80 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young woman, Nicole (Alexander), runs away from home with her aspiring actor boyfriend, Jess (Mendicino), and they head to California to start their new life together. En route, they stop at an out-of-the-way rest stop and are terrorized by a pick-up truck with the license plate KZL-303, and its driver. Jess disappears, leaving Nicole to navigate the bizarre situation alone. She encounters a number of individuals, including a missing young woman, and a police officer, but they are unable to help her, and may be hallucinations. She also encounters a weird fundamentalist family in a Winnebago, which seems to be part of the mystery as well.

COMMENTARY: This low-budget “road trip gone awry” film from *The X-Files*' writer John Shibana starts out with great flair and vast promise. A simple premise is set up with intelligence and foreboding. Two youngsters are waylaid by a mysterious pick-up truck on their way to California and tortured,

assaulted, and forced to fight for their survival. The set-up promises to be a taut exercise in suspense and horror. But before long, the idea of a simple, straight-forward narrative is lost, and additional story ingredients are slathered on until, finally, the movie is utterly incomprehensible. What starts out as a quasi-torture porn horror with a mad killer stalking new victims at an out-of-the-way rest stop transforms into a hallucinatory, bizarre, quasi-Lynchian effort that succeeds only in frustrating and disappointing the viewer.

One might be forgiven for starting *Rest Stop* and assuming, twenty minutes in, or so, that it is a new horror classic. The performances are efficient and strongly drawn, the location is intriguing and unique, and the action is harrowing and suspenseful. A low-budget type of raw, unpredictable energy suffuses the picture at its start. There's a universal fear at work here, too. Anyone who has ever traveled by car on a long road trip knows well the hit or miss nature of rest-stops, and also their isolation from the mainstream. Running across a lonely, out-of-the-way rest stop at night can actually be a pretty terrifying experience in real life. *Rest Stop* plays on that terror in effective ways, as the protagonists realize that they have taken a wrong turn into terror.

Again, the road trip gone wrong has existed in horror for years, but it finds its greatest relevance in the post-9/11 milieu. Going to work in the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, was every bit as much a detour or wrong turn into horror as any detour featured in films such as *Wrong Turn* (2003), *Wolf Creek* (2005), or even *Rest Stop* (2006).

But even armed with an effective premise and a surfeit of style and intelligence the filmmakers here lose their focus quickly, or at least their interest in telling that story. Before the film is over, Nicole encounters the ghost (maybe?) of a young woman who has been missing since 1971. She is helped by a sympathetic police officer, who is wounded, but also who appears to be a hallucination or a delusion. She boards an RV in which she meets weird twins who suck suggestively on ice pops, and runs afoul of their parents, who are Christian fundamentalist nut cases. And then there's the disfigured boy, who continually snaps photographs. The film's tone changes from one of heart-pumping suspense and terror to confusion, and then to depression, as the likeable policeman, who is a family man, is reduced to asking Nicole to shoot and kill him, to put him out of his suffering. Nicole becomes trapped in the endless cycle of disappearances too, with her face appearing on the rest stop's "missing persons board" at the film's conclusion.

The problem with the change in tone, and premise, is, simply, that it makes no sense. If the likable cop, Michael, was never really there at the rest stop (which appears to be the case, as much as this author can tell), then what is the audience to make of the fact that the pick-up driver tows away his motorcycle? Was the motorcycle also a hallucination? This is the same problem that scuttled *High Tension*. Going into the psychology of a madman or mad woman is fine, but vehicles are tangible objects that exist outside of internal mental schisms or pathologies. They don't drive up to farmhouses, and they don't park themselves, unless they actually, well, exist.

A case might be made that *Rest Stop's* true antecedent is not the road trip gone awry genre, or even the torture porn genre. Perhaps it is supposed to be read as a supernatural type film in the style of *The Shining*. Instead of a haunted hotel, there's a haunted rest-stop. Nicole encounters the ghosts of all who have died there, and all who have killed there, and like Jack Torrance, becomes a permanent resident, herself, there. Perhaps this is generous, but this reading is the only one that makes any semblance of rational sense. The problem with the story is that the bizarre nature of all the denizens of the rest stop encountered by Nicole precludes the possibility that she can survive the day. At one point, she blows up the driver's truck, and it seems a victory. But if motorcycles can materialize without a driver, does the destruction of the truck matter? If she is dealing with weird ghosts that exist forever, then she is doomed no matter what, isn't she?

Basically, by the mid-point of the film, the viewer disinvests in Nicole and her situation because it has reckoned with the possibility that anything is possible, and that anything can and will happen. She has no chance, and therefore it is not necessary to root for her anymore. She's a fly in a spider's web, and the spider will get her, because the spider has control. It seems a near constant refrain to write in this book that a film is well made, but badly done, and again, that description fits the bill for *Rest Stop*. As

tense, well-sprung film quickly goes right down the toilet, flushed into incomprehensibility, for reasons unknown.

A sequel was made in 2008, *Don't Look Back*, and it magnifies the lunacy to such a degree that it is virtually unwatchable. Horror fans are advised to find another exit, and not stop here, at either film in this low-rent franchise.

The Return ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Though trailers suggest that it's a horror movie, it's really more of an exploration of a trauma. It follows a young woman's struggle with violent, literally dark memories."—Cynthia Fuchs, *Common Sense Media*, last retrieved October 21, 2020.

"...elegantly told and compellingly acted."—Roger Moore, *Orlando Sentinel*, November 10, 2006.

"The climactic twist, when it comes, is reasonably satisfying, and there's a neat touch, at the very, very end, when the desaturated colors of the modern-day sequences melt gracefully into the full color of the flashbacks."—Ty Burr, *Boston.com*, November 10, 2006.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Sarah Michelle Gellar (Joanna Mills); Peter O'Brien (Terry Stahl); Adam Scott (Kurt); Kate Beahan (Michelle); Sam Shepard (Ed Mills); J.C. MacKenzie (Griff); Erinn Allison (Annie); Darrian McClanahan (Young Joanna Mills); Wally Welch (Snack Stant Vendor); Frank Ertl (Ambrose Miller); Brad Leland (Mr. Martin); Bonnie Gallup (Bella); Brent Smiga (Higgins); Robert Wilson (Billy).

CREW: Rogue Pictures and Intrepid Pictures Present, with Raygun Productions, Biscayne Pictures, and Rosey Film Productions LLC, *The Return*. Casting: Avy Kaufman. Production Designer: Therese DePrez. Costume Designer: John Dunn. Mr. X Inc., Laser Pacific. Music: Dario Marianelli. Director of Photography: Roman Osin. Film Editor: Claire Simpson. Producers: Aaron Ryder, Jeffrey Silver. Written by: Adam Sussman. Directed by: Asif Kapadia. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At age 11, young Joanna Mills (Gellar) experienced a traumatizing event at a carnival in the town of La Salle after a terrible car accident. Now a young adult, she experiences PTSD and self-harms to cope with the bad memories. One day, Joanna begins to experience strange visions, perhaps buried memories, of a dangerous, red bar. She returns to La Salle to find that bar and learn the truth of her strange visions. Joanna begins to meet people in the town whom she has never met, but whom she remembers. One such individual is Terry (O'Brien), a man she has memories of making love to, and who may be a murderer. In particular, his wife, Annie (Allison), was killed fifteen years ago.

COMMENTARY: Saddled with a generic title, and a PG-13 rating, *The Return* is actually a well-made and involving horror movie that concerns itself with the condition known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Specifically, *The Return* co-opts the supernatural concepts of soul possession or even reincarnation to explore how PTSD can destroy people. Sarah Michelle Gellar anchors the film with a sympathetic and strong performance.

Gellar plays Joanna, a 25-year-old professional who is "restless" and "can't sit still for more than two minutes straight." She is a workaholic who avoids her past, and also her family, by keeping busy on the job. When she goes to visit her father, in LaSalle, after a long absence, she stays in her childhood bedroom, and asks him what happened to her when she was young, at the carnival. He doesn't give a straight answer. Joanna cuts herself to feel better, and tells her father that she has harmed herself, and continues to do so, because she was trying to tell him "I needed help." She has scars on her body from previous self-mutilation.

The film spends much time on the ways that Joanna harms herself, and injures her body, to cope with the PTSD, and the film is on solid ground, medically speaking. According to the website *Very Well Mind*, “those in treatment who have a diagnosis of PTSD are more likely to engage in self-harm than those” without it. Furthermore, cutting oneself is an outlet (sometimes called “grounding” or “coming to”) to help in the expression and management of “negative emotions such as anxiety, sadness, shame and anger.” Because of her past trauma (or the trauma, in this case, of another, past life), Joanna hurts herself. Self-harm or grounding has become common in mainstream films and TV series, such as *The Affair* (2014–2019), but in 2006 this frank visualization of the material was ahead of its time.

Joanna’s odyssey in the film is to face the dark memories she experiences and come to terms with them. She learns that her memories are not her own. At a car accident at a crossroads when she was a little girl, the dying Annie transferred her soul, or her memories to her. This could mean that the real Joanna is dead, and that Joanna houses the soul of Annie, or simply that the presence of Annie’s spirit changed Joanna.

Throughout the film, Joanna is constantly rebuffed for not being who she was before the trauma, as if her pain and suffering is an inconvenience to others. “Why are you digging all this up?” she is asked. And when she looks in the mirror, this idea is showcased, as she sees a different woman—not herself—looking back at her in the reflection. Joanna has visually and literally disassociated from the person she was before experiencing that trauma. The point of that trauma, intentionally, is a symbol: a crossroads on the highway. After reaching that crossroads in a car accident/collision, Joanna’s life was not the same. All our lives, of course, possess cross-roads, places that change forever the direction we take in adulthood, and our personal and professional destinies.

What remains impressive about *The Return*’s thoughtful treatment of PTSD is that it is not treated as a puzzle box. Too often in supernatural films, a person determines that someone is possessed, or being haunted, and that if just some wrong can be righted, everything will be well again. But Joanna, here, has been haunted, terrorized by this trauma (Annie’s trauma) for fifteen years. That is more than half her life at this point. That trauma doesn’t just fade when the cosmic scales are righted. In the ending scenes of the film, we focus on Joanna, again at the crossroads, and it isn’t a joyous ending, but instead a notation that she has again arrived at a turning point.

She can choose to move in a new direction, perhaps, but the trauma is never going to go entirely away. It is a lugubrious, thoughtful note which suggests that *The Return* does not concern itself with typical Hollywood bromides about the paranormal or supernatural. At the end of the film, Joanna has gleaned more knowledge about what happened to her at age 11, but she remains haunted, and indeed, traumatized by her experiences. Just learning the “what” doesn’t free her, and the film doesn’t suggest that as an easy answer.

Some will find *The Return* glum, but the correct word may be solemn. The film treats its subject matter, PTSD, with respect, and that is saying something in an era when psychology was often deployed as motivation, but just for trickery and misdirection. The film’s visual palette is gorgeous, and reflects Joanna’s mind-set, as well. Many places from her visions, are washed out, devoid of color, except for the red bar. These are empty places to her in real life, because she doesn’t remember them, save for that bar. “It was just red,” she notes, importantly, and red is the (intense) color of blood, and of passion. That red bar becomes the place for restless Joanna to start putting together the pieces of her individual mystery. Ironically, the details of the mystery, the murder of Annie, are not all that interesting, once revealed. Instead, the ambiguous ending, which finds the haunted Joanna wondering, more than ever, about her identity is the film’s real denouement and it carries a lugubrious gravity about it.

Respect *The Return*’s journey, and its meditation on the nature of PTSD, and the film opens up in ways that are beautiful and powerful. In a very real sense, the 2000s was the decade of trauma, and PTSD. It was the decade of 9/11, of Katrina, the Iraq War, and other real-life crossroads. *The Return* is of its time because it suggests the power of those traumas to hold on and impact our futures, to alter our trajectories forever and send us down roads not, apparently, of our own choosing.

Saw III * * *

Critical Reception

“...well-made but redundant ... bring on the meat hooks, the power tools and the liquified pig entrails.”—Amy Longsdorf, *The Morning Call*: “If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen gruesome *Saw III*,” January 25, 2007, page E11.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Tobin Bell (Jigsaw/John Kramer); Shawnee Smith (Amanda Young); Angus Macfadyen (Jeff); Bahar Soomekh (Dr. Lynn Denlon); Donnie Wahlberg (Eric Matthews); Dina Meyer (Kerry); Leigh Whannell (Adam); Mpho Koaho (Tim); Barry Flatman (Judge Halden); Lyriq Bent (Rigg); J Larose (Troy); Debra Lynn McCabe (Danica); Costas Mandylor (Forensic Hoffman); Betsy Russell (Jill).

CREW: Lionsgate, Twisted Pictures, Evolution Entertainment and Cinespace present *Saw III*. Casting: Stephanie Gorin. Costume Designer: Alex Kavanaugh. Production Designer: David Hackl. Music: Charlie Clouser. Director of Photography: David A. Armstrong. Film Editor: Kevin Greutert. Producers: Mark Burg, Gregg Hoffman, Oren Koules. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Jason Constantine, Daniel Jason Heffner, Stacey Testro, James Wan, Leigh Whannell. Story by: Leigh Whannell, James Wan. Written by: Leigh Whannell. Directed by: Darren Lynn Bousman. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Amanda (Smith) captures a doctor, Lynn Denlon (Soomekh), and forces her to tend to the dying John Kramer/Jigsaw Killer (Bell), who will expire without brain surgery. Lynn is fitted with an explosive collar that can be activated if she fails to obey instructions. Meanwhile, John’s latest game begins. A man, Jeff (Macfadyen) has lost his son in a car accident and has an opportunity to revenge himself upon the judge (Flatman), the witness to the crime (McCabe) and the drunk driver responsible for the murder (Koaho). But Jigsaw loses control over this game, and Amanda begins to manipulate things, herself.

COMMENTARY: By the release of *Saw III*, the popular torture porn franchise was running like a well-oiled machine. The film is still fresh enough to offer surprises and shocks, yet also maintain consistency of production design, performance, and characterization. There is definitely some hardening of the arteries evident here, but in *Saw III* that condition is not yet fatal.

Saw III does not start well, and perhaps that is the best place to begin a discussion of the film’s weaknesses. The first trap in the film, featuring a fellow named Troy, is pretty uninventive, especially to start a sequel in this imaginative franchise. Basically, he gets chained up and must rip through the chains to escape a bomb.

Who does Jigsaw think he is, Pinhead?

Then, adding insult to injury, a beloved character is the next one to play Jigsaw’s game. Kerry, played by Dina Meyer has been a part of the *Saw* franchise from the beginning. Meyer has a likeable, intelligent screen presence, and has played Kerry, all along, as a dedicated and honorable police officer, working to bring to justice a maniac. Here, she gets strung up, and her breasts ripped off, and let’s face it: there’s no plausible reason why Jigsaw would pick her for one of his games. His tape suggests that she has spent more time with the dead than the living, and she has thus forsaken life and living.

But has she, though?

Really?

This seems like convenient screenwriting.

Kerry in no way seems like the ungrateful, corrupt people that Kramer deliberately targets. She is the opposite in fact. She has dedicated her life to a higher cause: justice. She has tried to help the victims of crimes, and their families. And now Jigsaw, and the franchise itself, dispatch her in gruesome fashion,

for no persuasive reason or motivation. After the underwhelming first test with Troy and the unnecessary murder of a beloved character, *Saw III* begins with one misstep after the other.

Once upon a time, the *Saw* movies gained more immediacy and relevance by having flawed people escape the deadly traps, and having the audience imagine what would have happened. By *Saw III*, the franchise is murdering characters who should never be tested to begin with, all in the name of a gory death sequence.

That's hardening of the arteries, all right, evidence of a franchise unable to resist the pull of gravity from formula and repetition.

And yet, *Saw III* still works, overall. One sequence involving a judge who is trapped at the bottom of a vat of pig guts is inspired and recalls the franchise in its glorious first two installments. Jeff chooses to save the Judge from this horrible fate, and once more, a *Saw* movie understands that there is more horror in what an audience can imagine, than in what a clever effects genius can show us.

Also, the connection between Jeff and Lynn, revealed in the last act, is a surprise, and both are worthy players for Jigsaw's game. They share a common tragedy, and Lynn is dead inside over it, and Jeff left a rage-a-holic. Their story is compelling, and one that any parent can identify with.

Another blessing is the fact that there is more characterization here amongst the regular or continuing characters than in any previous entry. Amanda and Jigsaw himself are both deepened and given increased screen time to complete their tale. This is the film in the series, perhaps, in which the filmmakers realize that Bell's Jigsaw, even on the verge of death, offers an avenue for storytelling that is simply too good to ignore. And since flashbacks have always been a core component of the *Saw* formula, John can "die" in the present, and still be a player in the past, via this technique.

Saw III is effective. It is a good film, with some missteps. It is also the first of the *Saw* films that feels like the spark of genius is missing, and a well-oiled machine is at work in its place. To be fair to the *Saw* franchise, however, one could compare it to *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween* or even *A Nightmare on Elm Street* in the 1980s. Those franchises spiked and dipped from entry to entry, with no consistency, no through line, and no sense, even, of responsibility or fidelity to the previous entry in some cases. The latter *Saw* entries may not be inspired, but they certainly are unified in terms of look, purpose and level of quality.

If this movie is any evidence, the *Saw* mill works pretty well indeed.

See No Evil *

Critical Reception

"...basic slasher fare"—Tom Meek, *Boston Phoenix*, April 23, 2009.

"Yikes, this is bad. It's awfully difficult to think of anything the movie does right."—Patrick J. Mullen, *As Vast as Space and As Timeless as Infinity*, January 31, 2020.

"Dark ... is content to bathe his film in the grotty ochre skank of *Saw* and *Se7en*, and to hell with anything remotely original or borderline interesting."—Marc Savlov, *The Austin Chronicle*, May 26, 2006.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Glenn Jacobs (Kane); Christina Vidal (Christine); Michael J. Pagan (Tye); Samantha Noble (Kira); Steven Vidler (Williams); Cecily Poison (Margaret); Luke Pegler (Michael); Rachael Taylor (Zoe); Penny McNamee (Melissa); Craig Horner (Richie); Mikhael Wilder (Russell); Zoe Ventoura (Eyeless Woman); Annaliese Woods (Young Girl).

CREW: Lionsgate, World Wrestling Entertainment, and Eye Scream Man Productions presents *See No Evil*. Casting: Mara Kelly, Abdul-Majeed Moulvi. Production Designer: Michael Rumpf. Special Effects: Brett Beacham, Photon VFX, FUEL International. Music: Tyler Bates. Director of Photography: Ben Nott. Film Editing: Scott Richter. Producer: Joel Simon. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Matt Carroll, Vince McMahon.

SYNOPSIS: Four years after an axe-wielding maniac goes on a murder spree, a group of young convicts take a bus from a detention center to a hotel that will be the site of a homeless shelter. Their job is to clean it up and make it ready for residents, but soon they run afoul of a murderous psychopath, Kane (Jacobs), who goes on the attack.

COMMENTARY: *See No Evil* is a dreadful, in-name-only remake of Richard Fleischer's 1971 Mia Farrow horror film, which looks like an absolute masterpiece by comparison. As readers may recall, that proto-slasher film involved a recently blinded woman, Sarah, having to navigate her new physical condition at the same time a murderer killed her family and pursued her through her now treacherous environs. Thanks to Fleischer's directorial chops, the original *See No Evil* overtly concerned vision, and how the audience—and Sarah—would see, or not see, things, including an overtly violent culture.

The remake kisses all that thoughtful material goodbye with nary a look back. There is no blind character in the film, though the killer, Kane, is obsessed with the removal of eyeballs, thus rendering people sightless. And adding insult to injury, the remake is over-edited—and senselessly edited too—to the point of total incoherence. The film's visual tapestry is dominated by cockeyed angles, quick cuts, freeze frames, and random black-and-white shots that suggest, mostly, an editor with attention-deficit disorder. There is a lot of hip-hop music in the film to accompany the stuttering, scattershot visuals, but the bumpy, aggressive musical selections only add to the overall impression of a desperate, pandering, noisy, and empty viewing experience. At times during the action, the film stock itself vibrates with the intense violence, an effect used to much greater impact in the oeuvre of Rob Zombie, but again, it plays as a desperate editing technique to elicit any kind of feelings or intensity about the empty narrative goings-on.

See No Evil focuses on a number of impossibly good-looking but shallow young reprobates who run afoul of a twisted, religious, killer, Kane. His mother locked him up in a cage as a child, and now this giant hulk collects the eyeballs of his victims, as the window to their souls. His mother, who is the caretaker at the hotel, believes her son is the Hand of God, punishing the wicked. And that is about as much back-story or narrative as one will find in the film. Bloody murder is the order of the day as characters are eaten by wild dogs, forced to swallow their own cell phones, and even hanged on hooks, Leatherface-style, all to the hiccupping rhythm of flash cuts and herky-jerky camerawork. The film uses religion as the motivation for the massacre, but doesn't explore religion, religious belief, or their relationship to violence in any way, whatsoever. In the decade when religious fanatics launched a terrorist attack on the United States, one would think there could be at least some commentary on this connection between zealous belief and violence, but *See No Evil* doesn't make even a token attempt to connect its storyline to the age in which the film was produced.

See No Evil may just be Exhibit A in terms of why horror fans dislike remakes. Genuine craft, as seen in the original film, has been replaced with visual fireworks, and a well-thought-out story about the nature of vision and violence been replaced by 80 minutes of insipid, cardboard characters being led to their deaths by a derivative boogeyman character. So, intelligence, and a commentary on society and our obsession with horror and violence (a key aspect of the Fleischer film) have been replaced by nothing of equal value. In fact, it has been replaced by nothing at all.

Again, it's important to point out that re-makers are under no obligation whatsoever to slavishly recreate their source material. That is not a requirement of their art. What is a requirement, for all films, however, is some intelligent reason to exist, some discourse based on the material that adds to the discussion of society, film, what-have-you. The galvanizing problem, especially with remakes of socially conscious seventies horror films like *See No Evil* or *It's Alive* is that modern filmmakers don't replace the valuable, pro-social content and discourse of their source material with anything whatsoever and choose simply to wallow in violence. Given the chance to view a horror film with meaning and value, or a

remake of that film with no meaning and value, the choice becomes obvious, and the whole decision to remake the property is called into question.

Why remake a property at all, when there has been no thought about how it can be meaningfully updated? The answer, of course, is that the original is still a brand name, and that some dollars can be eked out by exploiting that brand name. *See No Evil* is a wretched, empty remake, and a soulless cash grab, especially taking into account the source material. If the remake of *See No Evil* offends thee, as it did this author, pluck it from your queue.

LEGACY: A sequel, *See No Evil 2*, directed by the Soska sisters, was released direct-to-video in 2014, and saw the return of Kane.

Silent Hill ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“...the latest horror movie to use occult mumbo jumbo as an avenue to gory horror. Too long by about a half hour, very much in love with its own excessive style, it still manages to be kinda creepy, at least when it stops taking its metaphysics too seriously.”—Chris Vognar, *Knight Ridder Tribune News Service*, April 21, 2006.

“The latest in this sub-genre is the new based-on-a-video-game flick *Silent Hill*. Though it does have some scares and more than a few superb visuals, its game roots tend to show after awhile.”—David Koon, Lisa Miller, *Arkansas Times*, April 27, 2006.

“*Silent Hill* is a striking approximation of the gaming format. But the bare bones characterization, rigidly episodic structure and overcrowded frames permissible in first person role prove stubbornly uninvolving on the big screen.”—Samuel Wigley, *Sight and Sound*, July 2006.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Radha Mitchell (Rose da Silva); Sean Bean (Christopher Da Silva); Laurie Holden (Cybil Bennett); Deborah Kara Unger (Dahlia Gillespie); Kim Coates (Detective Thomas Gucci); Tanya Allen (Anna); Alice Krige (Christabella); Jodelle Ferland (Sharon/Alessa); Colleen Williams (Archivist); Ron Williams (Old Mechanic); Eve Crawford (Sister Margaret); Derek Ritschel (Police Officer); Amanda Hiebert (Gas Station Attendant).

CREW: Tristar Pictures, Silent Hill DCP Inc, Davis-Films in association with Konami present *Silent Hill*. Casting: Dierdre Bowen. Costume Designer: Wendy Partridge. Production Designer: Carol Spier. Special Effects: Laird McMurray Film Services, Patrick Tatopoulos Design, C.O.R.E. Digital Pictures, Mr. X, Intelligent Creatures. Music: Jeff Danna, Akira Yamaoka. Director of Photography: Dan Laustsen. Film Editor: Sebastian Prangere. Producers: Don Carmody, Samuel Hadida. Executive Producers: Victor Hadida, Andrew Mason, Akira Yamaoka. Written by: Roger Avary. Directed by: Christophe Gans. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 125 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Sharon (Ferland), a young child adopted by a new, upper-middle class family, experiences strange night terrors about a mysterious town in West Virginia called Silent Hill. At a loss about how to help her, Sharon's adopted parents, Rose (Mitchell) and Christopher (Bean) bicker. Over Chris's objections Rose takes Sharon on a road trip to the town. There, she encounters a strange other realm, where a haunted version of Silent Hill seems to exist, replete with monsters. Rose works to uncover the traumatic past of the town to save Sharon's future, even as she is assisted in her quest by a police officer (Holden).

COMMENTARY: In the gaming world, the *Silent Hill* franchise from Konami is *Resident Evil's* biggest rival in the “survival horror” milieu. The first *Silent Hill* game installment was released in 1999 to wide

acclaim, and there have been eight game installments since.

The Konami game franchise begins with a man named Harry Mason searching for his daughter in the mysterious and ominous rural town called Silent Hill. In that setting, in a labyrinth-like underground, he confronts the dark truth of the town, and the reality of monsters.

The 2006 film adaptation from *Brotherhood of the Wolf* auteur Gans provides the video game horror film its first genuine masterpiece: a strange, dizzying effort that unsettles, surprises and finally haunts the viewer instead of relying on cheap thrills or gimmicky visuals (as was the case in *House of the Dead*, *Alone in the Dark*, and *Doom*.)

Although the specific antecedent here is, of course, a video game, *Silent Hill* reaches back much further to dramatize its narrative. The film utilizes Greek mythology and 15th-century art, specifically, as templates to forge its tale of motherly love.

First and foremost, the movie might be viewed as an Orpheus story about a terrified, traumatized mother, Rose (*Pitch Black*'s Radha Mitchell) who visits a ghost town in West Virginia in hopes of finding out what demons vex her daughter, Sharon, who seems to be on the spectrum. In Greek myth, Orpheus was a great musician whose beloved wife, Eurydice, was killed by a satyr. He descended into the underworld to retrieve her, but Orpheus failed to live up to the deal he had made with Hades. Specifically, Orpheus was not to look back at Eurydice until they were both back on the fields of Earth, not in Tartarus. He failed to observe that rule and lost his beloved for all time.

To save Sharon in *Silent Hill*, Rose similarly descends into a Tartarus-like underworld where she encounters zombies, ghoulish soldiers dressed as miners, a cult, and an assortment of creepy-crawlies that would make anyone's skin crawl. Importantly, these ghoulish creations and the very environs around them in the town seem to be an externalization of some terrible, collective sin.

Buttressed by digital creatures and landscapes of Bosch-like proportions and nature, *Silent Hill* is a visual wonder. Hieronymus Bosch (AD 1450–1516) is remembered as an artist who created nightmarish visions of shapeshifted terrors, and that approach seems to be the start point for the film's visual imagination. There is only very minimal dialogue, and the dialogue that exists only takes the audience around in long, winding, half-conscious circles. Long stretches pass wherein the audience is in total silence with the main characters, and thus *Silent Hill* remembers that film is a visual art form.

In a nod to its video game roots the viewer spends much time in the film exploring basements, hotels, and a school named Midwich, as if traveling a video game, on some kind of fetch quest for information. The audience also experiences a series of battles leading to a final confrontation that feels like the mother of all boss battles. Indeed, one reader on this author's blog dismissed the film, he said, because it felt so obviously like a series of increasing-in-difficulty boss battles. That interpretation is valid, but ignores the rich visualizations of the film, as well as its artistic antecedents.

Indeed, *Silent Hill* is laden with gorgeous, unforgettable imagery. There's an idyllic opening sequence after the credits, for instance. The scene is set under a tree in a wide-open field and this pastoral vista makes an effective counterpoint to the nightmarish imagery of the prologue. It showcases the calm after the storm.

Shortly thereafter, when in search of *Silent Hill*, the so-called "Tainted Town," Gans' camera adopts an extreme high angle as Rose's jeep navigates a winding road by pitch black night. The illumination from her headlights is the only source of light for dozens of miles and the road is bracketed by foreboding, ominous woods on both sides. The impression crafted is clearly of a descent into the underworld. This God's Eye shot—familiar in the lexicon of the aughts—is appropriate as it suggests forces not aligned with Rose's quest.

The titular town itself alternates between two disparate realities. There is the town as it exists after the fire, which occurred thirty years ago, in November 1974 and where ashes continually fall from the sky like snowflakes, a beautiful and haunting image. And then there's the "dark" interval, when a fire siren sounds ominously, and the skies grow black. It is in this world that the monsters come out, fearsome personifications of death.

There are some similarities to *The Ring* (2002) in terms of narrative too. A little girl has been wronged by a community of superstitious zealots, and her vengeance is so strong that it destroys a town

and its populace. Yet, *Silent Hill* takes this story in a different direction than one might expect. *The Ring* concerned the ability of the mass media to transmit horror simultaneously to millions, whereas *Silent Hill* implicitly concerns the psychological conflict that arises in a child who has been abused by adults she trusted.

Alessa Gillespie is the girl's name, and she was burned as a witch in the town of Silent Hill all those years ago. She survived, but her psyche was splintered. She sent her "good" half or personality to Rose as an adopted daughter, Sharon. The demon side, Alessa, stayed behind in *Silent Hill* hell to torment her abusers. The two-sided nature of Alessa is reflected by the two-sided nature of the town itself. This concept of "doubling" keeps arising in the film as a leitmotif. There's the dual nature and twin realities of Silent Hill itself, with light and dark intervals, and there are two contrasting mother figures, one strong and dedicated (Rose) and one weak and confused (Alessa's mother, Dahlia). But more important is the manner in which this doubling reflects the experiences of an abused child.

Unlike *The Ring*, *Silent Hill* clearly views Alessa/Sharon in terms of being both the story's hero and villain; protagonist and antagonist, the victim and the victimizer. Adopting a psychological perspective, this is indeed the way that many abuse victims view themselves. They feel guilty; like there was cause for the abuse; but also angry because they know abuse was wrong. They feel simultaneously that they deserved it and that they didn't deserve it. Even the title of the film, *Silent Hill*, plays into this element of the narrative, since many abuse victims suffer their guilt in "silence," in a disassociated sense of reality. One reality, like the light interval, is a place where—on the surface—everything appears okay. The other, like the dark interval, is that place where the ghosts of abuses from the past take ghostly form.

It is not surprising that the cycle of abuse was caused, we learn in *Silent Hill*, by religious fundamentalism. The hierarchical structure of fundamentalism is such that authority can't be questioned. Or at least not easily, and yet absolute power corrupts absolutely, as the culture has witnessed with Ted Haggard, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, and other "moral" religious leaders. They've all had deep flaws that were only unearthed after a long, long time in "silence" and secret. The slavish devotion to authority, the non-questioning atmosphere of fundamentalism also allows predators to secretly act against the flock, and mainly children and women.

That's the central and overriding metaphor of *Silent Hill*. Alessa was destroyed as a "witch" by the leader of a zealous, puritanical religious sect in Silent Hill, and it is that sect's leader and her followers who are viewed as the real monsters here, not Alessa and her hellish demons.

Dueling Moms have become something of a cliché in the horror genre ever since *Aliens* (1986) but this film is legitimately about a mom who would go to Hell and back to save her child. "*Mother is God in a child's eyes*," is a line of dialogue heard a few times in the film, for example.

Finally, however, what may qualify *Silent Hill* for greatness in the genre is its moody closing interlude, a coda that could be interpreted in more than one fashion. Specifically, Rose and Sharon return home, but they find not a happy reunion with Chris. And Chris awaits at home, as Rose and Sharon fail to return. It is an ambiguously configured moment of deep melancholy and ominous foreboding. A would-be family reunion that should be joyous turns ambivalent, melancholic. Another emotional disconnect is forged; an indicator perhaps, that the cycle of abuse continues in some fashion. The darkness is not confined to Silent Hill, to that tainted town. The "double" layers of reality continue.

This coda brings the film to a strong conclusion, and overcomes, the talky, crowded scenes of exposition that diminish the film's third act. *Silent Hill* works best, and miraculously indeed, when it speaks in the language of imagery, not words. The longer *Silent Hill* is silent, the better it is.

Slither * * *

Critical Reception

"James Gunn strikes a surprisingly effective yuks-to-yuck balance. Factor in a cast that totally gets the

desired heavily ironic tone, and you've got a parody picture that pays blood-soaked homage to 1980s-style excess yet still manages to work on its own queasy terms."—Michael Rechtshaffen, *Hollywood Reporter*, March 31, 2006.

"*Slither* allegorizes living-dead horror as a critique of the American heartland's boundless gluttony. The film's aliens enter through the mouth or stomach and compel people to consume endless quality of meat—they grow so morbidly obese that they literally explode with extraterrestrial evil."—Matt Singer, *The Village Voice*, March 29, 2006.

"...more than the sum of its inspirations, achieving success on many artistic levels; it's an excellent example of a horror comedy, horror sci-fi, zombie/virus horror, and body horror."—Joshua Millican, *Pop Horror.com*, last retrieved October 21, 2020.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Nathan Fillion (Bill Pardy); Gregg Henry (Jack MacReady); Elizabeth Banks (Starla Grant); Michael Rooker (Grant Grant); Tania Saulnier (Kylie Strutemyer); Lorena Gale (Janene); Don Thompson (Wally); Xantha Radley (Uptight Mom); Dustin Milligan (Drawing Boy); Haig Sutherland (Trevor); Jennifer Cropping (Margaret); Zak Ludwig (Gina); Brenda James (Brenda Gutierrez); Bart Anderson (Butcher).

CREW: Universal Pictures, Gold Circle Films, Brightlight Pictures, in association with Strike Entertainment, presents *Slither*. Casting: Eyde Belasco. Production Designer: Andrew Neskromny. Costume Designer: Patricia Louise Hargreaves. Special Effects: Masters FX, Image Engine Design, Meteor Studios, Rocket Science CFX, Jack Labs, Switch VFX, Digital Dimension, Glimpse Digital, Kleiser-Walczak, Invisible Pictures, Lindala Schiminken FX. Music: Tyler Bates. Director of Photography: Gregory Middleton. Film Editor: John Axelrad. Producers: Paul Brooks, Eric Newman. Executive Producers: Marc Abraham, Thomas A. Bliss, Scott Niemeyer, Norm Waite. Written and Directed by: James Gunn. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Wheelsy, Texas, a meteor crashes in the woods even as the Mayor, Jack MacReady (Henry), gets ready for Deer Cheer 2005. Meanwhile, a local businessman, Grant Grant (Rooker), discovers the meteor in the brush and is promptly infected by an alien parasite. The alien bug begins to re-shape Grant's mind and he starts infecting the townspeople willy-nilly, including a mistress named Brenda, who becomes unwitting and unwilling host to thousands of parasite worms, each one sharing a hive mind with the Grant-host. Investigating this situation is Chief Bill Pardy (Fillion), a laconic but square-dealing lawman who happens to harbor a Texas-sized crush on Grant's nubile young wife, Starla (Banks). In one night of terror, the Grant monster and his zombie minions lay siege to the town, and also an isolated farm.

COMMENTARY: A good, perhaps great horror film, *Slither* may one day be considered a classic like *Tremors* (1990) even though at times it treads perilously close to the turf of that forgotten '80s flick, *Night of the Creeps*.

Fortunately, *Slither* is better than that two-decade old horror in just about every way imaginable (save for the absence here of cult-figure Tom Atkins). It may not sound like an original story, but this tale of alien invasion is filled with surprises and quirks that make it a genuine treat. The humor arises, in particular from the colorful character moments, the dialect of the locals, and a careful reversal and undercutting of expectations in key moments.

For instance, watch for the punchline involving a confiscated grenade that "just happens" to be stowed in the police station, and which we—as experienced moviegoers—know will play a role in the climax. Also, the sustained and tense set-piece in the farmhouse, in which a teenage girl, Kylie (Tania Saulnier), is attacked by worms in her cast-iron bathtub, is unexpectedly frightening and visceral.

Beyond these touches, the characters in *Slither* act with admirable consistency and the special effects stand up to close scrutiny. The latter point is a bonus, no doubt, and ratchets up the "ick" factor of *Slither*. It's a gory proposition, particularly in the macabre aftermath of a tentacle attack on one unlucky local who splits right down the middle before our eyes.

A movie like this must know and understand when to dole out tricks and when to give the audience treats, and *Slither* is adept in this regard. The humor, particularly involving the farmhouse and “Family Fun Day,” is ghoulishly good stuff, and not so obvious nor over-the-top that it ruins the suspense. And this sequence, which starts in the bathtub and goes out onto the roof, into the yard and finally into a parked car, is suspenseful. This movie doesn’t play favorites with the characters, but one doesn’t sense the writers’ mental wheels spinning in the background either

A few of the great jokes in the film are as follows: there’s a police map dotted with little squid icons to trace Grant’s location, a Karaoke performance to the tune of *The Crying Game*, and a pocketful of genre homage that rockets by at warp speed and doesn’t draw attention to itself. The intrepid horror fan will catch quick references to Frank Henenlotter (of *Brain Damage* and *Basket Case* fame), a town storefront called Max Renn’s (after James Woods’ character in *Videodrome*), and a few other touches. MacReady, after all, is the name not just of the town mayor, hero, but of the protagonist in John Carpenter’s *The Thing*, and that film also involves shape shifting.

In common with that aforementioned Carpenter film, *Slither* explicitly concerns the pliability and corruptibility of the human flesh, as our bipedal form is twisted, perverted and ruined by an invasive species. Notice, for instance, how the transmission of the “conscious disease” is a deliberate and bizarre parody of the human sex act. We first see it happen, by the way, to the strains of a country music tune. The movie’s social commentary seems to involve the avarice appetites of the middle class, as alien infection makes “regular folk” want to do nothing but eat, eat and eat. They become rapacious devourers of everything, and the results are grotesque.

In the tradition of such classics as *Halloween* (in which fate was lectured on to Laurie Strode) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (in which *Hamlet* was discussed with Nancy Thompson), *Slither* also provides a memorable high school classroom sequence featuring a thematic point. Here, Starla describes in detail Darwinism and the concept of survival of the fittest. This is *Slither*’s true playground, the battle of species, and impressively, the film even puts a cosmic spin on the material. At one point, and utilizing dazzling special effects, Kylie is granted access to the hive mind. In a flash, she witnesses the billion-year history of the parasite, and this chronicle is stunning. The audience witnesses alien vistas as strange, inhuman creatures on wild savannahs and under extraterrestrial skies wage war and fall before the parasite’s power. This is an unexpected moment in the film—an ambitious reach for greatness—and a welcome bit of explanation about where the creature came from. The movie would have still been good without this sequence, but this sequence adds immeasurably to the scope of the film’s war of the worlds.

Slither benefits enormously from the presence of Nathan Fillion in the lead role. Yep, he’s the Captain of the Serenity, but the performer possesses an easy, comfortable way with this material. Fillion doesn’t play Pardy lightly, with tongue planted-in-cheek, nor try to make a joke out of the monsters. In fact, his situationally appropriate sense of fatalistic humor is a boon to the material. The movie could have done without his wrestling match with an infected deer (the only lame scene in the whole movie), but otherwise, Fillion steals the show in *Slither*, and his presence ramps up the fun aspects of the film.

Any horror movie that can play “Every Woman in the World” over its climax and still prove scary, and utterly involving is one that must be respected. If you like your horror with a dash of thoughtful comedy, you can’t go wrong with *Slither*.

Snakes on a Plane * * *

Critical Reception

“...everything you could want from a movie with its glorious title ... it’s more than awesome enough to assure opening-weekend euphoria for those who were waiting for it already, and their positive word-of-mouth should draw plenty of people who weren’t.”—Dana Stevens, *Slant Magazine*: “In the Event of a Water Moccasin...” August 18, 2006.

"Preposterous action horror.... This is actually quite a bit better than it sounds." *The Daily Telegraph*, February 6, 2014.

"...it was a meme before we knew what memes were. It's a B-movie that's better than you remember, and for a glorious summer, we bonded over snakes on an airplane and an iconic line."—Jeff Leon, *Washington Post* Blog, August 18, 2018.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Neville Flynn (Samuel L. Jackson); Julianna Margulies (Claire Miller); Taylor Kitsch (Kyle); Nathan Phillips (Sean Jones); Rachel Blanchard (Mercedes); Flex Alexander (Three G's); Keenan Thompson (Troy); Keith Blackman Dallas (Big Leroy); Lin Shaye (Grace); Bruce James (Ken); Sunny Mabrey (Tiffany); Casey Dubois (Curtis); Daniel Hogarth (Tommy); Gerard Plunkett (Paul); Terry Chen (Chen Leong); Elsa Pataky (Maria); Emily Holmes (Ashley); Tygh Runyan (Tyler); Mark Houghton (John Sanders); David Koechner (Rick); Todd Luiso (Dr. Steven Price); Kevin McNulty (Emmett Bradley).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Mutual Film Company, Meradin Zweite Productions, Eyetronics and H2L Media Group present *Snakes on a Plane*. Casting: Mindy Marin. Production Designer: Jaymes Hinkle. Costume Designer: Karen L. Matthews. Special Effects: Eric Allard, The Character Shop, CafeFX, Hybride. Music: Trevor Rabin. Director of Photography: Adam Greenberg. Film Editor: Howard E. Smith. Producers: Craig Berenson, Don Granger, Gay Levinsohn, Jason Linn, Cathy Pollo, Mark Staubach. Executive Producers: Stokely Chaffin, Penny Finkelman Cox, Justis Greene, Sandra Rabins. George Waud. Story by: David Dalessandro, John Heffernan. Written by: John Heffernan, Sebastian Gutierrez. Directed by: David R. Ellis. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Hawaii, Detective Neville Flynn (Jackson) has found a witness whose testimony can finally put the crime-lord Eddie Kim behind bars for good. Now, however, Flynn must fly that witness safely back to the continental United States. That proves easier said than done, when Kim's henchmen hide poisonous snakes of every variety and species in the cargo hold of South Pacific Flight 121. While the plane is in flight, Neville and the passengers, as well as a highly competent flight attendant, Claire (Margulies), must repel the invasion by the slithering, hissing snakes.

COMMENTARY: A latter-day exploitation flick with no pretensions of greatness or artistry, *Snakes on a Plane* is a ridiculous movie in which there's snake vision P.O.V. (which much like the monster vision from *Pitch Black*), and also every outrageous snake-attack the intrepid screenwriter can imagine. It's a veritable checklist of silly moments with snakes. A snake bites a man's penis while he's urinating ("get off my dick, bitch!" he shouts during the uncomfortable-looking tussle). Another snake latches on to a woman's nipple while she's having sex in the bathroom with her boyfriend, played by Taylor Kitsch. Then there's an ass-bite on an overweight black rapper, a *coup-de-grace* for the ages.

But there's more.

Snakes on a Plane also offers a snake baked in a microwave oven (shades of *Gremlins* [1984]), snakes leaping out of barf bags, snakes pleasuring obese female air travelers (don't ask!), and a virtual potpourri of other movie absurdities. These moments of high silliness may remind horror fans of Stephen King's description of "*moron movies*." If so, then this is the most enjoyable moron movie to come down the road in a long while. By the time Samuel L. Jackson verbalizes his famous quote about "*motherfucking*" snakes on a "*motherfucking plane*," the movie wins over all naysayers, or objections.



He's tired of these "motherfucking snakes on the motherfucking plane." Samuel Jackson is Det. Flynn in *Snakes on a Plane* (2006).

Snake on a Plane, you had me at the ass-bite.

By the way, that moment with the snake and the ass-bite is quickly followed by a hysterical scene in which an effeminate male air-flight attendant offers to suck the snake poison out of the rapper's ass. It's just an utterly delightful and tasteless sequence of events.

Sure, it's easy to dismiss *Snakes on a Plane* as trash. But what marvelous trash it is! And it comes from a long, storied history in terms of genre/exploitation moviemaking. In short, this movie is a perfect fusion of two 1970s B-forms. The first is the revenge-of-nature or nature-run-amok environmental horror films of the disco decade, like *Frogs* (1972) or *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977), which pitted William Shatner against buckets and buckets of creepy crawlies. In this genre, animals attack people, usually because of something bad humans did, such as experimenting with hormones, or polluting the environment. In this case, evil criminals have sprayed pheromones on Hawaiian leis to drive the snakes wild! This is SSSSSSS! (Hiss it, don't say it!), or *Stanley* (1972) or *Venom* (1982) only gone one better.



Snakes alive! Det. Flynn (Samuel Jackson) avoids the snakes in *Snakes on a Plane* (2006).

The other genre in the mix is the airplane disaster movie, efforts such as *Airport 1975*, the airborne equivalent of *The Poseidon Adventure*. This genre saw a resuscitation in the 2000s with the entertaining Wes Craven thriller *Red Eye* and the lugubrious *Flight Plan*, starring Jodie Foster, but *Snakes on a Plane* is hands-down the best variation on this form since it was thoroughly roasted by *Airplane!* in 1980.



Snake Handler Jules Sylvester with Burmese python Kitty behind the scenes on the set of *Snakes on a Plane* (2006).

A jaunty, go-for-broke fusion of airport/disaster movie and animals gone wild—with all the clichés and gimmicks of each genre on hand—is likely an irresistible mix for disaster film aficionados. *Snakes on a Plane* for example, serves up all the passenger/victim stereotypes expected in the airplane disaster genre, including a newlywed couple, two children on their “first” solo air flight, a famous musician (not the late Sonny Bono, here, alas), a cop, the well-meaning stewardesses, and even a police witness being flown under protective custody. Then the screenwriters dish out the in-flight disasters that are *de rigueur* for the form: the death of the pilots (meaning someone else must land the plane!), mechanical disruptions, and the trip to the cargo section. And, naturally, there are opportunities for depressurization in mid-air, and a crash landing.

Best of all is that this film was written *dead serious*, with bad dialogue only the most perverse movie lovers could love and enjoy. The moment when the snake expert (referred to in the script as a “*hardcore snake specialist*”) describes to Samuel L. Jackson the nature of the snakes as “*serious*” and “*hyper-aggressive*” and Jackson responds that they are “*snakes on crack*” is a high-point for this brand of silly entertainment. For pure screenplay contrivance, one must also appreciate the moment when Jackson’s partner confesses that he suffers from Ophidiophobia—a fear of snakes.

Like what are the chances he’d end up on a plane with snakes?

In this genre, 100 percent!

The end of *Snakes on a Plane* is a bit of a mood breaker. The smirks and silliness inherent in vetting such ridiculous material bubbles to the surface, and the mood of deadpan thrills and chills is broken. It’s as though no one could keep a straight face for the climax. Which is understandable, one must assume. What goes up, must come down, after all. But if the gag reel is any evidence, it looks like the cast had a hell of a good time creating this silly movie, and that’s to their credit. It’s a testament to their professionalism that they didn’t break character or succumb to the ludicrous screenplay till almost the end of the picture.

Delighted with its own silliness, *Snakes on a Plane* holds the attention, and makes with the belly-laughs. It will be discussed for years in the annals of moron movies, and guilty pleasures, and that’s exactly as it should be.

Stay Alive * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“...shamelessly recycles plot gambits and character types from such recent films as *The Ring*, and *The Final Destination* series. Everything boils down to this: The kids are dispatched, one by one, in scenes of varying gruesomeness. Gee, where have we seen *that* before?”—Ed Hulse, *Video Business*, July 24, 2006.

“*Stay Alive* violates the fundamental contract that horror fantasies make with viewers. We will go along with the impossible as long as the film sticks to its own rulebook for internal consistence. In *Stay Alive*, however, the game operates only when people switch it on—of it decides to play itself. The villainess strikes strictly in the dark, except when she strikes during daylight. Characters who die in the virtual world die for real, although not always.”—Colin Covert. *Star Tribune*: “Movie about video game needs a reboot,” March 27, 2006.

“It’s the writing that dooms *Stay Alive*. All of the characters are merely types, one-note and generic. We’ve seen variations of all of them before. The dialogue is often lame.... The direction relies on stock shocks and the same bag of tricks throughout....”Stax, *IGN*: “Stay away from this tedious thriller,” March 27, 2006.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jon Foster (Hutch); Samaire Armstrong (Abigail); Frankie Muniz (Swink); Jimmi Simpson (Ohineus); Wendell Pierce (Detective Thibodeaux); Milo Ventimiglia (Loomis Crowley); Sophia Bush (October); Adam Goldberg (Miller Banks); Billy Slaughter (Rex); Nicole Oppermann (Sarah); April Wood (Loretta); Rio Hackford (Detective King); Billy Louviere (Fidget); Maria Kalinina (Countess); Lauren Lorbek (Emma); James Haven (Jonathan Malkus); Alice Krige (The Author).

CREW: Hollywood Pictures, Spyglass Entertainment, Endgame Entertainment, in association with Wonderland Sound and Vision, StayAlive and Buena Vista Pictures present *Stay Alive*. Casting: Mark Bennett. Production Designer: Bruton James. Costume Designer: Caroline Eselin-Schaefer. Special Effects: Pixel Liberation Front, Custom Film Effects. Music: John Frizzell. Director of Photography: Alejandro Martinez. Film Editor: Harvey Rosenstock. Producers: McG, Matthew Peterman, James Stern. Executive Producers: Gary Barber, Becki Cross Trujillo, Adam Del Deo, Jonathan Glickman, Douglas E. Hanson. Written by: William Brent Bell, Matthew Peterman. Directed by: William Brent Bell. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A video game tester named Loomis Crowley (Ventimiglia) dies after playing the new horror survival game, *Stay Alive*. After the death of his boss in the same manner, a group of friends led by Hutch (Foster) decide to play the game, which involves a bloody plantation run by the legendary Countess Bathory. With his squad of oddly monikered young adult buddies (Swink, Phin, October and Abigail) in tow, Hutch ventures into the game world to solve the mystery. What he finds in this arena of “horror survival” is that Bathory is murdering her victims and bathing in their blood as part of an occult ritual to remain eternally young and beautiful. One by one, the gamers die, sometimes even before their avatars in the game world expire. The key to stopping the Scarlet Countess rests in finding her real life body and burning her evil blood.

COMMENTARY: As the video game-themed film *Stay Alive* explains through some heavy-handed exposition, there have been numerous academic studies confirming that the longer you play a video game, the more you perceive the “game world” as reality.

This makes sense to me.

Every year in the 2000s, my wife Kathryn and I played at least one horror-survival video game together, whether it was *Resident Evil 4* or *Eternal Darkness*, for the Nintendo Game Cube. My

"perceptive reality" as *Stay Alive* terms it, was altered by playing these games, and in some remarkable ways. Even playing non-horror games, such as *Minecraft*, as I do with my son these days, boasts an impact on the player's perceptive reality. Again, that's not to say the alterations are bad. I have had dreams that occur in the video game worlds, just as I have had dreams about movies, or television programs. Like film, video games can be a powerful art form.

Given the popularity of video games in the 2000s, perhaps it was only a matter of time, given experiences like this author's, which I assume are common enough for gamers, that Hollywood decided to produce a movie about an evil video game wherein if you die in the game arena, you die in the same way in "real life."

This concept of "perceptive reality" is the bailiwick of *Stay Alive*, yet the film is not always as inventive and interesting than it should be because this material plays out as a fairly hackneyed concept. Consider *The Ring*. You watch the Samara's videotape and seven days later you die. Or *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. You fall asleep and Freddy hunts you in your dreams. If you die in your dreams, you're also dead in reality. So, though *Stay Alive* has adopted a relatively fresh arena for horror in terms of video games, the movie nonetheless plays like the "rubber reality" of old, a horror concept that came into its own in the late 1980s. The film doesn't really tread any revolutionary ground or carry the rubber reality ball down the field much, which makes it a disappointment.

Even the film's kill set-pieces aren't particularly inventive or scary, and those are usually the *raison d'être* for rubber reality: the creation of fantasy realms, with nightmarish beings. In fact, the movie's initial death sequence, of a character named Loomis Crowley remains the most frightening in the film. Oh wait, not his actual death, but his *video game death*.

Stay Alive cannily utilizes the first-person shooter perspective inside the video game world to reveal this character's entrapment. He turns from one side to another, dashes from one chamber to another (in a video game simulation of a haunted mansion) and is attacked from all sides by monstrous little moppets. This is strangely terrifying, even as rendered here, as pixels. This is all begun with a dramatic CGI sweep towards from the sky to an antebellum mansion, or plantation. The bad (or dated) CGI actually contributes to the feeling of being in the video game.

Another nice moment occurs late in the film. Phineas has been run over by Countess Bathory's horses and carriage, and the camera adopts a high angle at the crime scene, roadside. The film then shifts into fast motion photography but leaves the shot unbroken, as first responders arrive. The audience watches in fast motion as fire engines, an ambulance, and police cruisers pull up and perform their cleanup rituals. This too feels 100 percent like a video game visualization. The action is over, the audience is off at a distance (resting, as it were, before hitting reset) and all the scene lacks are the words "GAME OVER" superimposed over the first responders. This clever scene set-up seems to reinforce the video game motif of *Stay Alive*, just like the opening death and CGI introduction of the mansion.

Making no bones about it, however, it's fair to say that other than a few flourishes like these, *Stay Alive* just isn't very good. That may be because the film apparently feels pressure to appeal to younger audiences. It's not as daring, spiky or as kinky as it could and probably should be. Among the actors, Frankie Muniz is particularly annoying as Swink, and the film ends with the predictable destruction of Bathory (kind of), before the requisite sting-in-the-tail/tale.

Yet no mention is made of the fact that local authorities are still hunting Hutch and his friends for murder. They may have stopped the villain temporarily, but their story isn't exactly over. They get to experience the nightmare of the legal system yet, but the movie doesn't consider this angle. And that's weird, considering there are detectives following the case, suspicious of Hutch and his friends. This subplot is left completely unresolved.

Despite the pedestrian, safe nature of *Stay Alive*, there is a sense of nostalgia to it, one that will work for viewers of this author's generation. This is precisely the kind of "disposable" horror film I enjoyed and grew up with in the late 1980s. It plays very much like a latter-day *Elm Street* or *Hellraiser* film: a series of gruesome kill set-pieces and just enough plot to string them together. This is a trip back to the paranoid world of Crystal Lake, Haddonfield or Elm Street, wherein teens must survive the gauntlet, proving clever enough to solve a mystery and stay alive. Sure, it skews younger, but the PG-13

audience needs some horror too, right?

On the other hand, in a sign of our deadpan, grim 2000s, *Stay Alive* lacks one quality that made the *Elm Street* sequels bearable: a sense of irony about itself and its place in the pop culture. There's very little humor in *Stay Alive*, and no iconic boogeyman to crack wise or serve as ringmaster. Bathory is a bit of a cipher here. She doesn't have the personality of a Pinhead or a Freddy, nor does she provoke total fear (like Michael Myers in his original incarnation). This means that *Stay Alive*, as a potential franchise, just doesn't take things to the next level.

So, instead of a thumbs up or thumbs down, *Stay Alive* is awarded an Atari's thumb; which means, like games of old, the film provides moments of enjoyment, but also, some pain.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning * * *

Critical Reception

"It's actually closer to the original *Chainsaw* than its immediate predecessor, but it still relies more on physical torture (and accompanying audience squeamishness) than the psychological terror that made the original—or any genuinely scary movie—so effective."—Joshua Starnes, *Comingsoon.net*, September 29, 2006.

"The longer it stays on the screen, the closer the movie comes to the full-throttle nihilist comedy that Hooper himself seemed to be striving for in his own misbegotten *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*."—Scout Foundas, *L.A. Weekly*, October 5, 2006.

"There are inherent flaws in producing a prequel to a horror movie. First, there's no catharsis, since not only are the villains protected to return in the film we've already seen, but we know that fact walking into the prequel. When the killers are particularly sadistic, we need that release of seeing them get their comeuppance (even if they inexplicably return in another sequel like Michael Myers or Jason Voorhees.) Second, since there are no witnesses to the crimes perpetrated to allow for the later film to go on without police interference, all of our victims in this prequel must die. However, when the writing, direction and acting are this god-awful, there's no catharsis for the audience no matter who lives and dies."—Jonas Schwartz, author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Matt Bomer (Eric Hill); Taylor Handley (Dean Hill); Jordana Brewster (Chrissie), Diora Baird (Bailey); R. Lee Ermey (Sheriff Hoyt/Charlie Hewitt); Andrew Bryniarski (Leatherface/Thomas Hewitt); Lee Tergeson (Holden); Marietta Marich (Luda Mae Hewitt).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents a New Line Cinema, Platinum Dunes, Nezt Entertainment Vortex/Henkel/Hooper Texas Chainsaw Productions film, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning*. Casting: Lisa Fields. Costume Designer: Marian Ceo. Production Designer: Marco Rubeo. Music: Steve Jablonsky. Director of Photography: Lukas Ettin. Film Editors: Jonathan Chibnall, Jim May. Producers: Michael Bay, Mike Fleiss, Andrew Form, Brad Fuller, Kim Henkel, Tobe Hooper. Executive Producers: Jeff Allard, Toby Emmerich, Robert J. Kuhn, Guy Stodel. Based on the story by: Sheldon Turner and David J. Schow. Written by: Sheldon Turner. Directed by: Jonathan Liebesman. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1969, two brothers, Eric and Dean, are headed separate ways. Eric is headed to Vietnam, to serve the country. Dean is headed to Mexico, to avoid the draft. On the road, they run afoul of the Hewitt family, in rural Texas. There, the local slaughterhouse has been shut down, throwing the area into an economic collapse. Two other brothers, Charlie (Ermey), and Thomas (Bryniarski), adjust the only way they can: by murdering the police, and any passersby so that their family will never again go hungry. While Charlie impersonates and becomes Sheriff Hoyt, Thomas begins to wear human skins over his deformed face, and arms himself with a chainsaw, becoming Leatherface.

COMMENTARY: This prequel to the 2003 remake is everything that the critics at the time of the picture's release insisted it was: sadistic, humorless, and joyless. But this grim horror picture is something else too, which most critics missed: a dedicated indictment of capitalism which argues for revolution in the face of economic downturns.

The film opens with Leatherface's birth in 1939. He is born in his town's primary engine of labor and opportunity: *the slaughterhouse*. In 1969, The Texas Department of Health shuts down the slaughterhouse, however, killing the local economy in one fell swoop, and leaving both Leatherface (or Thomas, his given name) and his half-brother Charlie (Erney), with no way to legally sustain their family. Twice in the film, the desperate Hewitts note their resolve not to remain in this desperate situation. "*We're never going to starve again,*" and "*we're never going to go hungry again,*" the Hewitts insist.



Lost highway: Leatherface (Andrew Bryniarski) disappears into history in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006).

Deprived of the ability to achieve economic success within the bounds of the law, they revolt. Charlie murders the local sheriff, and becomes the sheriff, thereby becoming one of the authority figures who took away his livelihood. He installs his law, in other words. Similarly, Thomas literally remakes his face, and becomes the butcher Leatherface, a predator who finds the resources for his family to survive—meat—outside the bounds of human civilization and law and order. When society fails these brothers, and their families, they overtake that society, and install themselves in control of it, at least locally. When society and capitalism fail, they overturn it.



Their road trip went very wrong. Dean (Taylor Handley, face down) and Eric Hill (Matt Bomer) in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006).

Now contrast the Hewitts' approach to authority with that of Dean and Eric, the film's mirror set of brothers. Eric is preparing to go to Vietnam and die, because that's precisely what his government demands. He does not revolt against the order. However, Dean does revolt against the order, but in a way guaranteed not to change the system: he burns his draft card and wants to escape to Mexico, outside the reach of the law.

These brothers become the victims of the new order in Texas, the one run by Thomas and Charlie Hewitt, in part because they can't conceive of battling standing authority, as it already exists, in the form of the American government and rule of law. They are already sheep being led to the slaughter even before they encounter the chainsaw. They realize, late in the film that they have been screwed, and because they have bought into the system, "*there is no help.*" They realize too late their own ability to change things, and move from one corrupt system to an even more corrupt and murderous system of control



The Hewitt House of Horrors, with Chrissie (Jordana Brewster) in the foreground, from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006).

It's strange to consider how closely the film's subtext about revolution against corrupt authority mirrors the Hooper original from the early 1970s, and that may be because the historical contexts of the films are remarkably similar. In the early 1970s America was fighting an unpopular war in Vietnam, facing economic recession because of Oil Embargoes and OPEC, and struggling with an unpopular president, Richard Nixon.

In the mid-2000s, leading up to this film, America was fighting an unpopular war in Iraq, facing economic recession over the dot.com bust, and housing bubble (which would explode in 2008), and contending with an increasingly unpopular president, George W. Bush.

In both cases, people were questioning the order of things, as towns like those in the film, saw their economic livelihoods slip away. In the 2000s, it was the manufacturing base slipping away in Flint, Michigan, and other cities, thanks to Democratic and Republican support for deals like NAFTA, which saw companies rewarded for moving their business overseas because of cheap labor.

What was one to do in a place with no opportunity?

How do you feed your family?

Do you turn to crime? To violence? To bloody murder in the face of the economic apocalypse? That is clearly the idea underlining this film, and one that actually tracks with the original film's arguments. Leatherface is born twice in the film. He is born first, in the heyday of the slaughterhouse, when everything is fine. Then, he is reborn—as Leatherface—after the closing of the slaughterhouse.

Too many horror films in the 2000s are simply pretty entertainments, but not this film. It is dark, gloomy, pessimistic, and it has a point. When people are desperate, they will revolt, and do whatever is necessary to survive in the world.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning is awash in blood and gore, and violence, much like the 2003 film, and it is similarly, without any sense of humor. The 1970s original film is relentlessly surprising because for all its horror, it also features crazy comedy. There are moments of silliness there that render the characters, like Cook, Hitchhiker, or even Leatherface, as recognizably human, or even “family.” Cook complains about a destroyed screen door, for instance.

The Beginning does not go there. Not even in the slightest. Its mood, suitable for the post 9/11 era, is grim. The filmmakers commit to their dark material, in a very dark decade in American history. The movie ought to be embraced on those terms instead of derided. It is a horror movie that has something to say, and which respects the audience enough to flat out say it with no ameliorating humor or escape. It is dark, disturbing, and intelligent, which is something that can't be said of 2013's version of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, nor 2017's *Leatherface*.

The Beginning confronts the “origin” of Leatherface's family, and that origin is tied up in economic desperation and discontent, in a true reflection of Kim Henkel and Tobe Hooper's original vision. The approach is different, for sure, but as much as the times the films are produced are alike, they are also different in some crucial ways. Some will say that horror films made a deal with the devil after 9/11 to not be funny, to not be light, in honor of those victims. *The Beginning* stays true to that compact and is not an easy watch. But it is a worthwhile one, to be certain. It is far more effective, clever, and reflective of its time period than critics gave it credit for.

Underworld: Evolution ★ ★

Critical Reception

“...Beckinsale barely cracks a smile—more vamp next time please—but scores a perfect 10 for gymnastics and target shooting.”—Stephen Humphries, *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 27, 2006.

“Essentially everything fans of *Underworld* experienced in the first film is revisited in the second. This could in all be the sum total of this review: more of the same, and still reasonably underwhelming”—Grant Watson, Fiction Machine, September 4, 2020.

“Watching *British Blade* (my pet name for the *Underworld* franchise) is like watching digitally enhanced mud. Shot mostly in close-up and edited together in a frenetic blur, the film’s visual style seems geared to highlight the fact that you can’t really see anything that isn’t either snarling, exploding, or firing an automatic weapon.”—Jim Schembri, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 21, 2006.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kate Beckinsale (Selene); Scott Speedman (Michael); Tony Curran (Marcus); Sir Derek Jacobi (Corinus); Bill Nighy (Viktor); Steven Mackintosh (Tanis); Shane Brolly (Kraven); Brian Steele (William); Zita Gorog (Amelia); Scott McElroy (Soren); John Mann (Samuel); Michael Sheen (Lucian); Sophia Miles (Erika); Richard Cetrone (Pierce); Mike Mukatis (Taylor); Lily Mo Sheen (Young Selene); Andrew Kavasdas (Selene’s Father).

CREW: Screen Gems, Lakeshore Entertainment and Vancouver Film Studios present *Underworld: Evolution*. Casting: Deborah Aquila, Jennifer Smith, Tricia Wood. Costume Designer: Wendy Partridge. Production Designer: Patrick Tatopoulos. Special Effects: Patrick Tatopoulos Design, Luma Pictures, Furious FX, Café FX, Krypton, Fantasy II Film Effects, Evolution Effects Studio. Music: Mark Beltrami. Director of Photography: Simon Duggan. Film Editor: Nicolas De Toth. Producer: David Coatsworth, Gary Lucchesi, Richard Wright. Executive Producers: Danny McBridge, Terry A. McKay, James McQuaide, Skip Williamson, Henry Winterstern, Len Wiseman. Based on characters created by: Kevin Grevioux, Len Wiseman, Danny McBride. Story by: Len Wiseman, Danny McBride. Written by: Danny McBride. Directed by: Len Wiseman. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 106 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Selene (Beckinsale) and Michael (Speedman) must battle against a vampire warlord called Markus who hopes to free his Lycan brother, William (Steele) from an eternal prison that was constructed by Selene’s father. Selene and Michael deepen their romantic relationship and seek out the help of a vampire archivist, Tanis (Mackintosh), to better learn the twisted history of William and Markus, and how it related to the vampire elder, Viktor (Nighy). Together, the siblings could destroy the vampires and Lycans, so Selene and Michael work together to stop Markus from freeing his long-trapped brother. Unfortunately, they are too late to stop William’s escape, and a new battle is waged.

COMMENTARY: Kate Beckinsale is back as Selene the death dealer, a horror icon of the 2000s in *Underworld: Evolution*. Unfortunately, even Beckinsale’s formidable and charismatic presence in this famous role can’t rescue a convoluted film that overdoses on style but muddles its way through a byzantine story.

Like many horror films of the 2000s, *Underworld: Evolution* appears to have gone through a color filtration process in which every image emerges silvery-blue. This vivid color scheme may be meant to suggest sophistication and elegance, but the film’s screenplay is a shambles thus undercutting pretensions of greatness. The story lacks a real point of entrée for those who aren’t already deeply enmeshed in the franchise lore. The film opens with a flashback to 1212 and introduces brothers who go separate supernatural ways, one becoming a vampire, the other a werewolf, er, Lycan, and then ties Selene’s past and upbringing to William and Markus’s ongoing story. The most interesting and memorable aspect of the film involves Selene and Michael finally getting together and having sex. Beckinsale and Speedman are both attractive performers and have good chemistry. They shared the screen in the previous film, and they do everything to suggest a real emotional and physical connection in the follow-up,

The rest of the movie doesn’t make as much sense as one would prefer, nor look as good as its filmmakers no doubt hoped it would. The CGI effects, particularly for the Lycans, still look dreadful. And no explanation is given, again, why all-powerful vampires and werewolves should forego their particular strengths and battle instead with human weapons such as machine guns.

If they are going to use human weapons, why not go all the way with tanks, ICBMs, rocket launchers and the like?

Of course, the answer, for that such long range, large scale warfare would not permit the opportunity for slow-motion photography, Bullet-Time, and the sparks and whistles of martial-arts-like moves.

And those things are the franchise's bread and butter.

These films exist so that audiences can see Kate Beckinsale, poetry in motion, cavort in slow-motion, squeezing off rounds of ammunition at hapless enemies. There's nothing wrong with featuring a strong woman in a heroic role in a horror film, but one has to wonder if the imagery of Beckinsale strutting with hand-guns in outstretched arms is enough to carry a whole franchise if the aim is to appeal, film-after-to-film, to more than the ammosexual (those who get their rocks off to the sight of firearms).

At one point near the end of *Evolution*, a character notes with grim determination that "*chaos and fighting are inevitable*," and one would like to think that the film is on point with that remark. What *Evolution* suggests is that all the differences we humans artificially build around ourselves for purposes of fighting are just that, artificial. Therefore, they are meaningless. This film reveals that vampires and werewolves are of the same breed, originally ... human. But they have descended into endless race hatred for one another. This is not a small message in the 2000s, an era of conflicts such as Islam vs. the West, and red Americans vs. blue Americans. All the things that separate us only succeed to mask the thing that joins us: we're all part of the same human race.

However, given *Underworld's* stylistic predilections and focus on slow-motion gunfights, the idea that "*chaos and fighting are inevitable*" feels more like a promise of gunfights and sequels yet to come.

When a Stranger Calls * ½

Critical Reception

"...one long tease that, instead of building tension around Jill's efforts ... has her run around the house, unsuccessfully calling every friend, cop, and family member she knows."—Tim Grierson, *L.A. Weekly*, February 9, 2006.

"More graphic and obvious than its predecessor ... geared towards a generation that likes its horror in nonstop vivid close-ups rather than gradually revealed."—Leonard Maltin, *Leonard Maltin's 2015 Movie Guide*, 2014.

"This is a remake of a scary movie that has excised the scary parts."—Jay Stone, *The Dinwdor Star*: "When a Stranger Calls redundant and pointless," February 4, 2006, page B5.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Camilla Belle (Jill Johnson); Tommy Flanagan (Stranger); Katie Cassidy (Tiffany); Tessa Thompson (Scarlet); Brian Geraghty (Tommy); Clark Gregg (Ben Johnson); Derek de Lint (Dr. Mandrakis); Kate Jennings Grant (Kelly Mandrakis); David Denman (Officer Burroughs); Arthur Young (Will Mandrakis); Madeline Carroll (Allison Mandrakis); Steve Eastin (Detective Hines); John Bobek (Officer Lewis); Brad Suroskey (Boom Boom); Karina Logue (Track Coach); Rosine Hatem (Rosa); Escher Holloway (Cody); Molly Bryant (Parent); Lance Henriksen (Voice of Stranger).

CREW: Screen Gems, Davis Entertainment, and Sony Pictures Releasing present *When a Stranger Calls*. Casting: Nancy Naylor. Production Designer: Jon Gary Steele. Costume Designer: Marie Sylvie Deveau. Asylum Visual Effects, Steve Galich. Music: James Dooley. Director of Photography: Peter Menzies, Jr. Film Editing: Jeff Betancourt. Producer: John Davis, Wyck Godfrey, Ken Lemberger. Executive Producer: Paddy Cullen. Based on the 1979 movie by: Steve Feke, Fred Walton. Written by: Jake Wade Wall. Directed by: Simon West. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Jill Johnson (Belle) goes babysitting for the wealthy family of Dr. Mandrakis (de Lint), unaware that a stalker is watching her, and has gained access to the physician's home. Soon, the stalker

begins calling Jill, and taunting her, asking if she has “checked the children” that she is babysitting. A night of terror ensues for Jill, and also for her friends, such as Tiffany (Cassidy), who innocently come to the house.

COMMENTARY: It is no exaggeration to state that the first act of Fred Walton’s 1979 horror film, *When a Stranger Calls*, remains one of the most powerful of its decade. In that scene, a babysitter is first irritated, and then terrorized by an unseen telephone caller. The scene’s final punctuation is the stuff of legends, and pop culture fame. The terrorizer has been inside the house with the babysitter all along and has already murdered her wards. A master’s thesis in escalating suspense, *When a Stranger Calls*’ first act is simply unforgettable, and in all likelihood unsurpassable. That’s especially the case if one considers the uninspiring 2006 remake. It never attains anything even nearing the same crescendo of terror.

The original *When a Stranger Calls* succeeded in part, because of the vibe or atmosphere it created. Babysitting is a near-universal occupation for teenagers, and Walton’s film was set in a normal suburban neighborhood. There was nothing out of the norm about the Mandrakis family, their house, or their neighborhood. The first film worked so well because it concerned normalcy violated.

By contrast, the remake can’t be bothered to set up normalcy, at all. Instead, it removes the Mandrakis family from a normal but upscale house and puts them in the kind of HGTV Dream House reserved for multi-millionaires. It also takes their house out of suburbia and lands it in a thick forest. It even gives them a guest house too, so the killer has yet another place to hide, and Jill has another dark realm to explore. The dream mansion includes a vast nature habitat in one room (with a convenient pond in the middle), and all the lights turn themselves on and off, based on habitation. Likewise, fireplaces activate by remote control, as do recessed plasma TV sets. Oh, and this house stands on the shore of a misty lake, so it looks to be perched in Transylvania, and consists almost entirely of two-story windowpanes so the lurking killer can see everything poor Jill is up to.

In other words, this is the kind of home that exists only in Hollywood movies.

There’s nothing familiar, routine, simple or normal about it, and so the movie loses all sense of verisimilitude almost immediately. This is a fantasy, not a horror most people (except the rich one percent) can identify with.

The remake of *When a Stranger Calls* also goes for the PG-13 rating and thus dials back the horror. As noted above, in the original film the children die. They are murdered in their beds, and when the babysitter finally checks on them, as the caller urges, she learns this. In the remake, they are still alive, and survive the movie. This significantly lessens the feelings of danger and distress in the remake.

It’s a safe remake, and one that doesn’t go to any truly transgressive places.

Another inferior substitution involves the lead actress. Carol Kane did a great job playing an average American teenage girl in the original film. She was scared, but resourceful too. She contended with the escalating horror in a fashion that might be termed realistic. In the remake, Camilla Belle plays a shallow, insipid character who is given identifiable heroic “traits” by the writer, so she can survive her night of horror. She’s a runner, for instance, and she summons those running resources to survive.

Carol Kane was also attractive in a normal, real life sense. Belle looks like a super model, and although this author is certain in real life that she must be a lovely human being, she comes across in the film as haughty, unlikeable, and lacking any depth.

Belle is not assisted by the dreadful script, which requires Jill to be insipid and foolish for most of the film’s running time. For example, it takes Jill fully half the movie to call her parents and tell them she’s in danger. When she leaves them a message, she doesn’t bother to indicate that she’s having a life-threatening emergency. Instead, she says “call me when you get in,” or words to that effect. How about shouting “help!”?

Director West also assiduously telegraphs every single scare and would-be surprise in the film so the audience can practically clock them. For instance, he takes the viewer on an “exposition” tour of the alarm system, reminds us of the live-in domestic help on the third floor, mentions the son from college in the guest house, and periodically re-introduces a cat named Chester, who’s always good for a jump-

scare when things get dull.

Which is a real danger here.

Anyone who's ever seen a horror movie will guess *exactly* when and how each of these "red herrings" is going to come up and serve the plot. There's not a legitimate jolt to be found in this remake. It's sort of amazing just how bad this film is on virtually every level imaginable. Even the sound effects are bad. There are little yellow birds living in that habitat I wrote about above, yet when they fly by Jill to generate a scare, it sounds as though giant leathery dragon wings are flapping in a vast cavern.

Remaking *When a Stranger Calls* was a fool's errand anyway. Horror fans already know all the punchlines—"the call is coming from inside the house" and "check the children,"—so why make audiences wait a tedious hour to get to them and then recite them?

And why not give them to viewers in surprising, unexpected ways?

Why make the audience suffer through endless shots of the impossibly gorgeous house? Why replace the brilliant first scene of the original film with a disastrously directed and edited new first scene: a montage at an amusement park where roller coaster rides are inter-cut with the screams from an off-screen (and confusing) murder? This scene is a catastrophe in conception too. The very first shot of the film depicts a house that looks like an upper-class arts-and-crafts mansion on the edge of a carnival fairgrounds. The carnival basically stands in the backyard, it's so bloody close.

It takes the remake of *When a Stranger Calls* an hour to get to something the source material got to, and did better, in the film's first fifteen minutes. These negative reviews of remakes can be tiresome, this author realizes. Many share the same problem. And that problem is that they take the brand name of a beloved film and try to imitate the form without really understanding the substance of those films. They may recreate the trademark moments of the source material, but they utterly fail to recapture the spirit of the original films. *When a Stranger Calls* takes its place alongside *The Fog*, *It's Alive*, and *April Fool's Day* as a terrible 2000s remake of a 1970s classic.

When this particular stranger calls, do yourself a favor and just hang up.

The Wicker Man * *

Critical Reception

"The first *Wicker Man* was about a cult. The remake is more about a dolt. Nicolas Cage plays the world's dumbest cop in *The Wicker Man*, an ill-advised do-over of the 1973 British horror film about a pagan cult on a remote Scottish island."—Bill Muller, *Arizona Republic*: "Rhymes with Snicker," September 2, 2006.

"It's clear that the original *The Wicker Man* is a better horror movie, from conception to execution. It's raw, biting and thoroughly eerie, with the twist ending packing way more of a punch. However, I could see myself watching the remake over again a few more times. It's endlessly entertaining, and I love that it is an unintentional comedy."—Mackenzie Jamieson, *Tallahassee Democrat*: "Which version of *The Wicker Man* deserves our love?" April 24, 2017, page U14.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Nicolas Cage (Edward Malus); Ellen Burstyn (Sister Summerisle); Kate Beahan (Sister Willow Woodward); Frances Conroy (Dr. T.H. Moss); Molly Parker (Sister Rose/Thorn); Leelee Sobieski (Sister Honey); Diane Delano (Sister Beech); Michael Wiseman (Officer Pete); Erika Shay Gair (Rowan Woodward).

CREW: Warner Bros. present, in association with Alcon Entertainment and Millennium Films, *The Wicker Man*. Casting: Heidi Levitt. Costume Designer: Lynette Meyer. Production Designer: Phillip Barker. Music: Angelo Badalamenti. Director of Photography: Paul Sarrossy. Film Editor: Joel Plotch. Producers: Nicolas Cage, Boaz Davidson, Randall Emmett, Norman Golightly, Avi Lerner, John Thompson. Executive Producers: Danny Dimbort, George Furla, Josef Lautenschlager, Elisa Salinas, JoAnne Sellar, Trevor Short, Andreas Thiesmeyer. Based on the 1973 screenplay by: Anthony Shaffer. Written and Directed by: Neil LaBute. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A dissolute policeman, Malus (Cage), suffering from PTSD learns that his young daughter, Rowan (Gair), in the custody of her mother, Woodward (Beahan), has vanished. He travels to the idyllic island where they live, which is a matriarchal society, or cult, run by Sister Summerisle (Burstyn) to find her. Malus attempts to track down his daughter, even as he becomes ensnared in a mysterious and deadly destiny.

COMMENTARY: In my review of *The Wicker Man* (1971), in *Horror Films of the 1970s*, I wrote that *The Wicker Man* is a stinging indictment of religion in general, and Christianity in particular, and that the film succeeded as well, on the basis of its ending because the best mysteries are those which end with a total, yet logical surprise. *The Wicker Man* satisfied that requirement and so much more as it reached its terrifying apex.

In that classic film, as you may recall, an outsider, a prim and proper Christian policeman named Howe, arrived in Summerisle, an island with its own customs. Howe was revealed to be a hypocrite as director Robin Hardy spelled out a well-defined Christianity vs. Paganism debate. His point was that there were absurdities and contradictions in *all* religions, so it is useless and wasteful to bother debating which is better or superior. Yet Sgt. Howe was unable to see past his faith to determine the fallacies of his own chosen belief system. He was an arrogant Christian who arrived in a culture he knew nothing about, and then rapidly determined that it is inferior. When Howe brazenly deposited a makeshift crucifix upon Rowan's tomb, he was imposing his own belief system on someone that had already thoughtfully developed a *different* set of beliefs. What right did he have to supersede that decision simply because *he* valued Christianity?

As this reminder about the original film hopefully makes plain, the value of the original Hardy film arises from: (1) the total arrogance of the protagonist, a Persian flaw that allows him to be tricked into a situation not of his selection: his untimely death. and (2) the fact that the film features an effective surprise ending that is totally in synch with all the preceding plot points.

So along comes the 2006 Americanized remake of *The Wicker Man*. There was every expectation that it would be good. Neil LaBute is the director, and he is the artist responsible for two scathing and brilliant cinematic essays about man's inability to connect to his fellow man, *In the Company of Men* (1995), and *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1997). Considering this, LaBute seems a good choice to helm the material featured in Anthony Shaffer's story.

Another reason for hope: The decade of the 2000s was actually the best time imaginable to undertake a remake of this seventies film. Remember, the original film concerned an arrogant Christian authority-figure, and during the decade of 9/11 there was one such person occupying the Oval Office. George W. Bush's defiant, unilateral, evangelical "*spread democracy at all costs*" approach, based, he believed, on Christ's blessings, led the country into folly and bloodshed in Iraq. There, the U.S. kept stubbornly attempting to impose a Western-style democracy on people who already possessed their own ideologies. Bush invaded Iraq without even knowing the difference between a Shiite and a Sunni. All he needed to know was that he believed God was behind him on the endeavor. One can detect how a new *The Wicker Man* might prove relevant and meaningful in 2006. On a national scale, the nation had been tricked into a conflagration by imposing Western values where they were not welcome.

Still, even if handled beautifully by a talented artist and with a relevant cultural zeitgeist firmly in place, a remake of *The Wicker Man* could not succeed on the same grounds that the original did because the tale's ending would never again serve as a surprise. Everyone who's viewed the original knows how the story ends; how—indeed—the story must end if the material is to be honored.

Still, it was worth a try, right?

Then came the first sign of trouble. Crazy-eyed Nicolas Cage was cast in the lead role, a part originally played by self-confident, but disciplined Edward Woodward. Cage's on-screen persona was exactly the opposite of his predecessor's. But Cage's casting is just one troublesome element of this weak remake. Whereas Woodward played an arrogant, dogmatic, self-satisfied man of faith, Cage plays instead a down-on-his-luck police officer who is coming out of a trauma caused by a roadside accident

he witnessed close-up. If Cage's character has any particular religion he holds dear, the film makes no point of it. His beliefs never even come up in the remake of *The Wicker Man*. They're immaterial, and thus the original story is rendered meaningless.

And that's a gigantic problem, because as my review of the original makes clear, this material *should* be about a culture/religious clash. *The Wicker Man* is a movie about a man who is so stubbornly convinced of the primacy of his faith that he bumbles into another faith unknowingly and pays the ultimate price for his ignorance. With that all-important context removed from the film, LaBute's remake is hollow.

Also gone from the 21st-century re-mix is all the sex and titillation of the disco decade iteration. In the original film, Edward Woodward found an island of pagan rituals where little kids danced around giant phallic symbols, and the islanders made love out in plain sight, much to prissy Howe's chagrin. Who can forget Britt Ekland's sexy and alluring dance around the hotel room, beckoning the engaged Woodward to an illicit tryst?

One will find not even a weak PG-13 resonance of this sexuality in LaBute's gutless remake. It's true that he turns the "pagan" island into a matriarchy, with Ellen Burstyn taking over the Christopher Lee role, but merely because he's made the film about *sex roles*, that doesn't mean it's *about* sex. Again, what's missing here goes back to the central issue of religion. For Woodward's character to be a worthy sacrifice to the pagan gods, he had to be—in his own mind—a righteous man. Had he engaged in pre-marital sex with Ekland's native girl, he would have failed that test, and not been burned alive in the wicker man. Again, see *how every element of the tale goes back to Woodward as a devout, arrogant man unable to see past his own nose and belief system?* Cage's character in the remake doesn't have to confront his own beliefs in any similar way.

All of the potentially agitating context has been removed from *The Wicker Man* for 2006. Now, Cage visits the pagan island in search of a daughter he didn't know he had. So, the story is "personal" and wholly lacking in the intellectual firepower demonstrated by the original. What leads Cage to his doom in this film is not his belief system, not his religious convictions, but his love of a woman who bore him a daughter.

How dull and utterly bankrupt is that idea? How many times have we seen that before? Why replace the superior culture-clash/religious template with something so mundane?

The artist who made *Your Friends and Neighbors* is also a man capable of crafting an intelligent film about the culture clash between an "alpha male" like Cage's character and a matriarchal society, as featured here, but oddly, LaBute doesn't concentrate on that aspect of the tale either. Instead, his film gets lost in odd subplots about beekeepers, Leelee Sobieski's ultimately irrelevant character, and other narrative dead-ends. Accordingly, this movie is a narrative mess from top to bottom.

In the years since it has been released, *The Wicker Man* has become a prodigious dank meme generator, in part because of the remake's apparent campy presentation.

Not the bees!!!

Yet I don't object to the remake of *The Wicker Man* on the grounds that it is campy and over-the-top. LaBute couldn't make a film in the spirit of the original with the pagan festivals and funny costumes without somebody complaining about it being "camp." I object to the film because the core material has been lobotomized and rendered harmless for the masses.

I closed my review of the disco-decade *The Wicker Man* with these thoughts: "*The Wicker Man* is not only a great and meaningful film it is one of the ten best horror movies of the 1970s. It makes us look at our own religion and ask *why* it looks the way it does. It makes us question the things that organized religions want us to take for granted. It's a film about a man who is so cowed by his religion's dogma that he walks unwitting into a flame. That's a testament either to his faith, or his stupidity. You choose."

I stand by those words, and also by my assessment of this foolish remake. 2006's *The Wicker Man* should have been—literally—*incendiary*, especially given everything that's happening in our world today. Instead, it's just a silly little time waster.

The Woods (DTV) * * 1/2

Cast & Crew

CAST: Agnes Bruckner (Heather Fasulo); Emma Campbell (Alice Fasulo); Bruce Campbell (Joe Fasulo); Patricia Clarkson (Ms. Traverse); Lauren Birkell (Marcy Turner); Jane Gilchrist (Ms. Cross); Catherine Colvey (Ms. Leland); Marcia Bennett (Ms. Mackinaw); Rachel Nichols (Samantha Wise); Kathleen Mackey (Ann Whales); Cary Lawrence (Ms. Charevoix); Colleen Williams (Ms. Arbor); Gordon Currie (The Sheriff); Jude Beny (School Nurse); Missy Alto (Barb); Maia Balestrieri (Jen); Maggie Castle (Tracy); Amber Cull (Mara).

CREW: United Artists, MGM, and Cinterenta present a Furst Films Production in association with Cinegreen, *The Woods*. Casting: John Papsidera. Production Designer: Dan Leigh. Costume Designer: Aline Gilmore. Special Effects: Intelligent Creatures, Soho VFX. Music: John Frizzell. Director of Photography: John R. Leonetti. Film Editors: Dan Labental, Joel Plotch. Producers: Bryan and Sean Furst. Executive Producers: Marco Mehlitz, Michael Ohoven, Randy Ostrow. Written by: David Ross. Directed by: Lucky McKee. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1965, a young woman, Heather Fasulo (Bruckner), is enrolled in the remote Falburn Academy, an all-girls school on the edge of a forest after she nearly burns her house down. Heather's parents, Joe (Bruce Campbell) and Alice (Emma Campbell), are of different minds about sending Heather away to school. Meanwhile, the headmistress of Falburn Academy, Mrs. Traverse (Clarkson), and some of her teaching staff believe that Heather may a "gifted" student and begin administering tests to Heather. Heather experiences strange dreams of a bloody girl and is admonished not to go into the woods at night. As she spends more time on the school campus, she begins to unravel a mystery involving missing students at Falburn.

COMMENTARY: Is it wrong to focus a review of the less-than-stellar *The Woods* on the overall and remarkable excellence of director Lucky McKee's earlier horror film, *May*?

May was a vivid and emotionally affecting character piece. It was a close-up, intimate study of one of the decade's most intriguing and heart-wrenching individuals. *May* was human, non-conventional, tragic and touching in a way that most movies can't even begin to approach. It was about a person who was, for lack of a better word, broken. And yet still very human, and relatable.

By comparison, *The Woods* is just, well, wooden.

It's a long, dull, predictable (and worse, conventional) slog that is notable only for the myriad of uninventive ways it apes the superior Dario Argento film, *Suspiria* (1977). In both cases, the films involve young women at a school for witches.

Alas, not much new has been added to the mix here.

Meandering and slow, *The Woods* takes a long time to set-up its tale of the school, the surrounding woods, and the young, insightful student who is to be initiated into the sisterhood of witches. Bruce Campbell is on hand to play the semi-heroic father figure to Heather, but even he seems to be performing in molasses here. At one point, he comes out of a trance-like state to save his daughter, and that is a feat the movie never quite manages. *The Woods* is never roused out of a stupor that perhaps is mistaken for style. What should be a slow-burn type of horror story of incrementally mounting suspense and horror never gets off the ground to generate any real sense of momentum or building terror.

Make no mistake, this is a prestigious "A"-type horror film with a quality cast, and a terrific director. But the result is a film of stunning flatness and mediocrity.

The cinematography in *The Woods* is great, to give the film its due, particularly in the scenes in the forest. The performers are strong yet feel disinvested, as if they may not truly understand the story, or its arcs. Overall, the movie lacks an appropriate intensity and drive, or even a point of entry that would make it stand-out or prove memorable. Heather proves an interesting lead protagonist, but somewhat

impenetrable in ways. She clearly must grapple with Mommy issues, since her mother tells her to “*stop being such a weakling and make me proud*.” The sisterhood at the school is just waiting to swoop in, like a pack of vultures.

Again, one can see how this material might have gone somewhere, if only for a different approach, or point of attack on the material. The first hour is so slow that any excitement about the already-familiar premise just bleeds out of the picture. A school for witches. A supernatural secret in the woods. These are horror ideas that have appeared before and been handled better elsewhere.

This movie is a real slump for McKee.

But did I mention how great *May* is? Where *May* flowers, *The Woods* can't see the forest for the trees.

TIMELINE: 2007

January 4: Nancy Pelosi is elected the first female Speaker of the House in U.S. history.

January 6: The first iPhone is introduced by Apple CEO Steve Jobs in San Francisco.

January 10: President Bush announces a troop surge in Iraq, planning to deploy 20,000 additional combat troops in Iraq.

January 20: New York Senator and former First Lady Hillary Clinton announces her candidacy for President of the United States.

February 10: Illinois senator Barack Obama declares his candidacy for President of the United States.

March 3: A truck bomb in Baghdad kills 139 people and injures 339.

April 16: Forty-nine people are shot by undergraduate Seung-Hui Cho at Virginia Tech, in the deadliest mass shooting yet on a college campus.

April 25: War hero and Arizona Senator John McCain announces his candidacy for President of the United States.

June 29: The iPhone is released.

August 9: The Dow Jones Industrial Average drops 387.18 points.

August 14: 572 people die in Iraq from suicide bombs.

September 16: Israel launches air strike in Syria against a nuclear plant.

September 17: At the University of Florida, a student is tased by police while asking a question of Senator John Kerry at a Constitution Day forum. His rejoinder to the police, “*don’t tase me, bro*,” becomes a pop culture catchphrase, at least for a while.

November 5: The Writers Guild of America goes on strike.

AVP: Requiem *

Critical Reception

"Screenwriter Shane Salerno's dialogue is unspeakable, the visceral horror all too familiar, and the ideas distinctly second-hand."—Nigel Floyd, *Time Out*, January 18, 2008.

"...both trashy and inexplicable ... expect a brisk, gooey bit of shlock..."—Chris Nashawaty, *Entertainment Weekly*, January 9, 2008

"...filmed in such total darkness your eyes will ache from squinting."—Jamie Russell, *BBC Film*, January 15, 2008.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Steve Pasquale (Dallas); Reiko Aylesworth (Kelly); John Ortiz (Morales); Johnny Lewis (Ricky); Ariel Gade (Molly); Kristen Hager (Jesse); Sam Trammell (Tim); Robert Joy (Colonel Stevens); David Paetkau (Dale); Tom Woodruff, Jr. (Alein); Ian Whyte (Predator); Chelah Horsdal (Darcy); Meshach Peters (Curtis); Matt Ward (Mark).

CREW: Twentieth Century–Fox, Davis Entertainment, Brandywine Productions and Dune Entertainment LLC Present *AVP: Requiem*. Casting: Mindy Marin. Production Designer: Andrew Neskoromny. Costume Designer: Angust Strathie. Special Effects: Hydraulix, Amalgamated Dynamics. Music: Brian Tyler. Director of Photography: Daniel C. Pearl. Film Editor: Dan Zimmerman. Producers: John Davis, David Giler, Walter Hill. Based on characters created by Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shussett. Based on characters created by: Jim Thomas, John Thomas. Directed by: The Brothers Strause. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Pred-Alien and other xenomorphs crash on Earth in a small Colorado town. A bunch of face-huggers get loose in the woods, thus spawning more aliens, and the Predators send one of their own from their home planet to clean up the mess. Caught in the middle of this war are a bunch of horny teenagers, a former juvenile delinquent named Dallas (Pasquale) and a tough-as-nails Iraq War vet, Kelly (Aylesworth). They all attempt to escape the sleepy burg of Gunnison, while the U.S. Government puts a fatal strategy into effect, one that it hopes will contain the spread of the alien forces.

COMMENTARY: Long ago—and according to legend—the great Sigourney Weaver put down the iconic Ripley role permanently because 20th Century–Fox envisioned a new direction for the *Alien* series.

What was that new direction? *Aliens vs. Predators*.

Perhaps apocryphally, perhaps truthfully, Weaver noted that she believed aliens belonged in the darkest, most isolated corners of deep space, not jumping out from behind haystacks on Earth.

Aliens vs. Predator Requiem (2007) is the movie she had the foresight to imagine. It's the aliens-jumping-out-of-haystacks film. And it is no exaggeration to note that *Requiem* is godawful. It represents franchise-scuttling at a heretofore unimaginable, apocalyptic level. The movie is incompetently lit, making important details impossible to determine, but its worst sin is that the narrative is incoherent and contradictory. The film never bothers to build towards anything significant, and scenes start and stop without rhyme or reason.

Perhaps the most trenchant commentary about this sequel's quality is that *AVPR* is the first film in either classic horror franchise that feels it necessary to spotlight teenagers skinny-dipping in a high school pool after hours. And yep, these horny teens are attacked by swimming aliens there.



Whoever wins this time, we still lose. A shot of alien-on-predator combat from the sequel *AVP: Requiem* (2007).

Once upon a time, neither franchise required stripping high schoolers to draw enthusiastic audiences. Once upon a time, both franchises were intelligent, beautifully designed meditations on the darker angels of human nature. But now—all the sudden—we're asked to sympathize with the angst and ennui of a pizza delivery boy who wants to date a girl he's always liked.

Because *that's* the reason audiences go to see *Alien* and *Predator* films.

There have been controversial films before, in both franchises. *Alien³* (1992) was about the fact that survival isn't always a "win." One could also gaze at *Aliens* (1986) as a metaphor for American arrogance during the Vietnam War. And the original *Alien* (1979) was about, in some subconscious sense, human sexuality co-opted by a nasty xenomorph. Even 1997's *Alien Resurrection*—for all of its problems—offered worthwhile commentary on the morality of human cloning, and the way that man had unwittingly become more like the xenomorphs by corrupting the lifecycle of other beings.

But the best that *AVPR* can muster is to steal a page from the 1980s slasher film formula: vice (sex) precedes slice-and-dice, or in this case, attack by alien. That's right, the Rolls Royce and Cadillac of horror franchises settle for *Friday the 13th*-style scenarios that are so hackneyed they were being mocked by *Scream* a decade earlier.

Now the "Dead Teenager" formula absolutely has a purpose and a validity in appropriate circumstances. But one nonetheless hates to see *Alien* lobotomized into the equivalent of a bad slasher flick. Especially one that so readily dispenses with series continuity.



The pred-alien rises in *AVP: Requiem* (2007).

On that front, consider the modifications presented by the Pred-Alien. It has developed, genetically speaking to eschew the egg and face-hugger stages of development. Now it simply kisses its prey and pumps embryos into the throat, leading right to the chest-burster stage. This unnecessary alteration is emblematic of the film's lack of patience. *AVPR* isn't willing to take its time, make its characters sympathetic, or generate real feelings of terror and unease. Instead, it just wants to barrel away, skipping the things that would have made the film more than an extended wrestling match. *AVPR* never bothers to explain how an infusion of Predator DNA permits this change in the alien's nature. Since the answer is never given, one might reasonably suspect that the filmmakers decided to do something "cool" rather than something faithful or dramatically motivated. Here, we get a scene where a few chest-bursters erupt out of a pregnant woman in labor, and that, one supposes they believed that fulfills "the cool factor."

Another question: why does Predator technology—and even the spaceship interior—suddenly look completely different than how it looked at the end of *Alien vs. Predator*?

AVPR also puts the final nail in the long erosion of the "un-killable alien" meme first realized by Ridley Scott in 1979. In his original film, the alien couldn't be killed, and couldn't even be stopped. Its quarry could only get away from it, to leave it behind floating in space. Yet here teenagers with handguns literally blow aliens away left and right. Twenty-first-century weaponry is more than efficacious blowing up these once unstoppable beasts. The trademark xenomorph—once a genuine Terror from the Id—is now just a big "bug" to be swatted with our state-of-the-art hardware.

Forget the fact that it took advanced, futuristic hardware like smart guns and pulse rifles in *Aliens* to do the same job. Nope, now kids can do it with good old-fashioned, conventional shotguns and pistols. Among other problems, this fact dishonors Ripley's four-movie journey. She fought the alien without weapons. She fought the alien with weapons too. She even laid down her life to prevent the aliens from reaching Earth and impacting innocent families. Why? The xenomorphs were so dangerous that they could destroy everything, *imperil all life*. They were a perfect (and perfectly hostile) life-form. ... and if they reached our cities ... it was game over. *AVPR* undercuts Ripley's meaningful sacrifice by putting aliens on Earth—and making them containable—before Ripley was even born. This "sequel" film fails egregiously because it rewrites the saga in a way that makes Ripley's choice to die rather than birth a queen seem inconsequential.

If aliens can be put down by shotguns, what's the big deal?

Another complaint: watch how the aliens move in this film. They are almost universally seen on all-fours, as though they are banana-headed dogs rather than the upright drones of the earlier films. The Predator fares slightly better in the film, though he operates by no sense of logic that is discernible. This Predator arrives on Earth with the mission to "clean up" the mess. Audiences periodically see him spilling glowing blue acid on the corpses so as to cover the tracks of both the aliens and his own kind. It's his mission, we presume—from this act of destroying the evidence—to hide the incursion of extra-terrestrials on Earth.

Given this task, the fact that the predator *skins a police deputy and hangs his corpse from a tree*—to be found by the sheriff—doesn't make a lot of sense. Why go out of your way to destroy all evidence of your presence, and then leave behind a bloody, hanging corpse in a tree. That's just one incredible gap in situational logic, but there are bigger fish to fry here.

When the movie was first released, there were a number of online reviews from unhappy fans indicating that the film was poorly shot: that it was too dark. This is not just fan griping. This author knows of no modern-day corollaries for this overt failure in a major, big-budget production. But for some reason, *AVPR* is terribly, *terribly* under-lit throughout. Even the daylight scenes are hard to see. Viewers spend the entire movie squinting, trying to make-out the crappy action.

This is a movie that actually hurts to watch.

In scene after scene, dark, indistinguishable figures clash with other dark, indistinguishable figures, all to the sound of squealing, gunfire and grunting. Rain falls, and audiences finally get the illumination they desire and need from brief instances of gunpowder flare and lightning strikes. Perhaps the film was darkened post-production because the monster suits weren't up to scrutiny? Regardless, the film is

inarguably a visual disaster.

In the final analysis, *AVPR* isn't merely an insult to the intelligence, it's an insult to the great tradition and lineage of *Alien* and *Predator* films.

A requiem, by the way, is a hymn for the dead; a musical composition for the expired. In this case, the "requiem" sung by *AVPR* is the death knell of not one, but two classic horror film franchises.

Blood and Chocolate * * ½

Critical Reception

"What a fine accomplishment for German director Katja von Garnier. She has delved into the traditionally all-male world of directing a genre monster movie and turned it into a *Romeo & Juliet* with style. There's a distinct lack of gore and the violence isn't overbearing while the astounding art direction and overall moodiness of the movie is only heightened by a filming on location in Romania...."—*Hollywood.com staff*, *Hollywood.com*, January 26, 2007.

"...a lovely surprise, an imaginative and visually lush picture firmly rooted in the tradition of gothic romance...."—Stephanie Zacharek, *Salon.com*, January 27, 2007.

"There have been failed pilots for third-rate television networks ... that are superior in almost every way to *Blood & Chocolate*."—Peter Hartlaub, *San Francisco Chronicle*: "Their hair is far from perfect in laughable werewolf flick," January 26, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Agnes Bruckner (Vivian); Hugh Dancy (Aiden); Olivier Martinez (Gabriel); Katja Riemann (Astrid); Bryan Dick (Rafe); Chris Geere (Ulf); Tom Harper (Gregor); John Kerr (Finn); Jack Wilson (Willem); Vitalie Ursu (Constani); Bogdan Voda (Albu); Kata Dobo (Beatrice); Rodic Mandache (Mrs. Bellagra); Sandu Grui (Pharmacist).

CREW: MGM, Lakeshore Entertainment, Daniel Bobker Productions and Blood and Chocolate Productions Ltd. presents *Blood and Chocolate*. Casting: Nancy Naylor, Andreea Tanasescu, Tricia Wood, Jeremy Zimmerman. Production Designer: Kevin Phipps. Special Effects: Patrick Tatopoulos Design, Framestore CFC, Effects Associates. Music: Reinhold Heil, Johnny Klimek. Director of Photography: Brendan Galvin. Film Editors: Emma E. Hickox. Producer: Tom Rosenberg. Wolfgang Esenwein, Hawk Koch, Gary Lucchesi. Executive Producers: Robert Bernacchi, Ehren Kruger. Based on the book by: Annette Curtis Klause. Written by: Ehren Kruger and Christopher Landon. Directed by: Katja von Garnier. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Following a tragedy in her youth in which her parents were killed, Vivian (Bruckner) moves to Bucharest and works in a chocolate shop owned by her aunt, Astrid (Reimann). Vivian, like all in her family, is a werewolf. The alpha of the local werewolf pack, Gabriel (Martinez), follows a tradition in which he seeks a new mate every seven years. He wishes to ditch Astrid and marry Vivian, believing she can help usher the pack into a new, better age. Vivian, however, soon falls for Aiden (Dancy), an American artist, who can never return to the States, because he is wanted by the law. As Aiden falls for Vivian, however, he runs afoul of Gabriel and the wolf pack.

COMMENTARY: Based on a 1997 novel, *Blood and Chocolate* is an imperfect but not terrible film that inhabits much of the same character and "universe" terrain as the much more popular *Twilight Saga*. In fact, *Blood and Chocolate*, the movie, is an object lesson on the danger of being first, of being slightly ahead of your time. A year later, in 2008, all the story elements of *Blood and Chocolate* would make for a pop culture phenomenon when presented in a slightly different package in *Twilight*. But in 2007? The

time had not yet come for this female-driven story to carry the same resonance on a wide scale.

Both novels and both films center on an independent-minded young adult woman who starts to cement her adult identity and place in the world through her interactions, specifically, with the supernatural. In the case of *Twilight*, Bella goes to Forks, and is soon caught in a romantic tug of war between a vampire and a werewolf. Bella defines herself, ultimately, in relation to these young men, particularly the vampire.

In *Blood and Chocolate*, Vivian, the “wolf girl,” embarks on a similar journey, but with a critical difference: she is the monster, and the object of her affection is human. Right off the bat, it is clear that she is the one imbued with superhuman powers. Also, to her, the existence of “monsters” is not a new discovery. Vivian has been born into a world of monsters. That is one crucial difference. In rejecting the monsters, Vivian rejects the establishment, and that carries deeper meaning, culturally speaking than simply picking up a new boyfriend.

So, while *Twilight* and *Blood and Chocolate* both inhabit a world of rich green forests, and shirtless male werewolf hunks, *Blood and Chocolate* at least imagines that the woman at the center of a love triangle (here represented by Vivian, Gabriel and Aiden) possesses some personal agency. In her wolf form, Vivian is a startling white wolf who can bring hope to the future and bring the wolf population out of the shadows and into the light. In other words, if this is a hero's journey, Vivian is clearly the hero; the individual with a great destiny and the one who must make difficult decisions to create that future.

The werewolves have operated in shadows for 500 years and are bound to a tradition which both demands hiding and which views humanity as a menace. Vivian can reject this order (which, let's face it, represents aging, self-indulgent patriarchy) and can offer change and progress in its place. If she chooses her society, and tradition, Gabriel would still rule the pack, and Vivian would be at his side as a kind of figurehead or a trophy.

Again, it is not difficult to read a societal critique into the film. Vivian must decide if she is to follow in the path of other women in the wolf community, including Astrid, her aunt. They become the wives to the leader of the pack, but then are turned over for newer, prettier models as the years pass. In the wolf world, and perhaps in the human world, marriage and monogamy serve the man more than they do the woman. This is the path that Vivian does not want to take; the path of tradition and in many ways, subjugation and oppression.

And, of course, Vivian actually loves Aiden, the human, not Gabriel the alpha werewolf. Importantly, this romantic relationship between man and she-beast is not defined in terms of a drug addiction or chemical “need.” Edward Cullen falls for Bella, ultimately, because he can't resist her scent. The attraction is based on a biochemical quirk, an uncontrollable appetite not a relationship that acknowledges the woman as an actual individual.

By contrast, Vivian and Aiden actually develop a relationship based on their attraction to one another; their fascination with one another. Vivian's choice is which world to inhabit, but finally this is her choice, and she possesses great power that is intrinsic to her nature as an individual, as a woman ... and as a wolf. To self-actualize, she must not rely on the power of a werewolf protector, or a vampire boyfriend. Vivian can buck against the expectations her family has for her on one hand (the side of the triangle represented by Gabriel), but on the other side is Aiden, and her desire to be free. “*It's your life. You don't get another*,” she is reminded. Of course, even if Vivian possesses more agency and power than Bella in *Twilight*, we finally must come back to the same old problem.

Both women, in both stories, define their place in the world by their relationship to men.

To compare *Blood and Chocolate* explicitly to *Twilight* perhaps does the film no favors, but the franchises are incredibly and eerily similar. In the final analysis, however, *Blood and Chocolate* must stand on its own. It is not really a strong horror film, even though it might have been nice to see it take off in the place of *Twilight*. It could certainly be argued that the film is superior to *Twilight* in terms of performances, photography, and writing.

And it could likewise be argued that it is a stronger film than all the (terrible) *Twilight* sequels. *Blood and Chocolate* is a bit less backward, a bit less traditional in its worldview, and view of women, than *Twilight*. Yet *Blood and Chocolate* still makes a dependence on a “boyfriend” relationship the key

factor in a woman's choices.

All of Vivian's choices revolve around which man she chooses.

What would Alison Bechdel have to say about that?

And, finally, *Blood and Chocolate* degenerates into uninteresting shoot-outs with silver bullets rather than strong character moments which focus on Vivian's decision how to navigate the adult world, adult convention, and patriarchal tradition. Make no mistake, *Blood and Chocolate* is a handsome film, with some memorable images of the werewolves hunting their quarry in a lush moonlit forest. The CGI is less bad than the CGI in the *Twilight Saga*, anyway.

But *Blood and Chocolate* does not usher in the "age of hope," it promises for Vivian, the werewolves and human beings, alas. It is a mostly obscure film today, dwelling forever in the shadow of the inexplicably more popular *Twilight Saga*.

*Boogeyman 2 (DTV) * * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Danielle Savre (Laura Porter); Matthew Cohen (Henry Porter); Chrissy Griffith (Nick); Michael Graziadel (Darren); Mae Whitman (Allison); Renee O'Connor (Dr. Jessica Ryan); Tobin Bell (Dr. Mitchell Allen); Johnny Simmons (Paul); David Gallagher (Mark); Lesli Margherita (Gloria); Tom Lenk (Perry); Sammi Hanratti (Young Laura); Jarrod Bailey (Young Henry); Lucas Fleischer (Mr. Porter); Suzanne Jamieson (Mrs. Porter); Christopher Fields (Detective).

CREW: Columbia Pictures, Destination Films and Ghost House Pictures presents *Boogeyman 2*. Casting: Lauren Bass, Karen Meisels. Production Designer: John Collins. Costume Designer: Elaine Montalvo Special Effects: Quantum Creation FX. Music: Joseph LoDuca. Director of Photography: Nelson Cragg. Film Editor: Jeff Betancourt. Producers: Gary Bryman, Steve Hein. Executive Producers: Joe Drake, Nathan Kahane, Rob Tapert. Based on characters created by: Eric Kripke. Written by: Brian Sieve. Directed by: Jeff Betancourt. M.P.A.A. Rating: Unrated. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: As children, Laura and Henry witnessed the brutal murder of their parents by a force that they both believe is the Boogeyman. Ten years later, they are both still haunted by this experience. Laura (Savre) checks herself into a psychiatric clinic with other young adults suffering from many phobias, while Henry is now living in San Francisco, and seems to have put the past behind him. At the clinic, kindly Dr. Allen (Bell) orchestrates group sessions in which he tries to cure the phobias of his wards, with little success. Soon, however, a dark force begins killing the patients, one who preys on their darkest fears. As Laura sees her peers murdered, one-by-one, she comes to believe that the Boogeyman has returned to her.

COMMENTARY: This sequel to 2005's *Boogeyman* is a decent, if not inspired, retro 1980s "group therapy" horror movie. In some ways, it plays a lot like a remake, even, of *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors* (1987), or *Bad Dreams* (1988). In films of this type, a group of young adults suffer from some specific psychological phobias and are treated by irresponsible or non-believing adult professionals who only want to try out new therapies, or new drugs to help them. In this film's central scenario, a group of youngsters contending with said psychological phobias form the film's victim pool, yet treated by a very suspicious doctor, played by *Saw*'s Tobin Bell, and come face to face with a spiritual stalker, not unlike Freddy (Robert Englund) or *Bad Dreams*' Harris (Richard Lynch). In this case, the monster is the titular Boogeyman. He is not the same character seen in the earlier film, rather a whole new "slasher"-type villain.

The events of the 2005 film are mentioned in passing here, and we learn that the lead character

there, Tim (Watson), was treated at the clinic and died under Dr. Allan's care. Given his not-very-successful track record, Dr. Allan proves a perfect avatar for youthful fears about uncaring authority. Rather than helping his wards, Allan offers generic psychological claptrap and jargon that would help no one, and so is a perfect suspect and red herring for the identity of the boogeyman. One often wonders if he is orchestrating all the deaths at the clinic to further his own career ends.

Meanwhile, the movie establishes each teen character handily by his or her particular fear. There's an obsessive-compulsive, an agoraphobic, a nyctophobic (afraid of the dark), and, of course, Laura, who is Boogeyphobic.

No, that's not a fear of the Bee Gees, but rather a fear of the Boogeyman.

Almost all of these characters come to unpleasant ends in memorable horror set pieces that exploit their terrors. Mark, the kid with a fear of the dark, for example, goes down to the basement to smoke some weed (slice precedes slice and dice!) and all the lights go off. He is then murdered in the dark by the Boogeyman!

Boogeyman 2 also features enough abstract talk about the Boogeyman being a "common scapegoat" in all cultures, and the "masks we create" in society to cover our fears to seem both smart, and relevant to the 2000s, and the culture of fear. Ultimately, the film wears out its welcome a bit, with perhaps one or two tricks too many, so that investment in the characters is lost. Also, at times it plays like a collection of familiar plot elements from other horror films. For instance, the final unmasking of the Boogeyman involves a trick right out of *Halloween: Resurrection's* retcon of *H20* (1998), and one murder scene takes place in a boiler room, invariably bringing up memories of Freddy Krueger's murder playground.

Ultimately, this is one of those cases where a viewer's mileage may vary based on particular likes or dislikes in the horror genre. If one is a fan of *Phobia* (1980), the aforementioned *Dream Warriors* or *Bad Dreams*, this film feels like happy, warm nostalgia, instead of a retread that, while not destroying the *Boogeyman* cycle, doesn't exactly carry the ball much further down the field, either.

Captivity ★ ★

Critical Reception

"The movie is tedious at best."—Tony Wong, *The Toronto Star*: "Torture porn for popcorn eaters not up to snuff," July 15, 2007.

"Despite a well-telegraphed twist and gory action turning more conventional, the pace never flags and the increasing daftness fails to become an issue. Joffe's interest clearly lies in society's obsession with celebrity rather than the nuances of the genre, but Cohen's precision script succeeds in keeping him on the terror track."—Alan Jones, *RadioTimes*, June 22, 2007.

"A dire load of tripe, *Captivity* deserves to have all the negatives of the film kept hostage in a remote vault in a far-off place, never to see the light of day again."—Tony Delgado, *Digital Spy*: "Elisha Cuthbert makes a wild departure from her role in *24* by being kidnapped in this truly awful movie," June 21, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Elisha Cuthbert (Jennifer); Daniel Gillies (Gary Dexter); Pruitt Taylor Vince (Ben Dexter); Michael Harney (Detective Bettiger); Laz Alonso (Det. Ray Di Santos); Maggie Damon (Detective Susan Luden); Carl Paoli (Victim #1); Trent Broin (Victim #2).

CREW: After Dark Films, Captivity Productions, Foresight Limited, and Russian American Movie Company present *Captivity*. Casting: Dianne Crittenden. Production Designer: Addis Gadzhiev. Costume Designer: Jennifer Marlin. Special Effects: Amalgamated Pixels, Look Effects. Music: Marco Beltrami. Director of Photography: Daniel Pearl. Film Editor: Richard Nord. Producers: Mark Damon, Gary Mehler, Leonid Minkovski. Executive Producers: Valery Chumak, Courtney Solomon. Written by: Larry Cohen, Joseph Tura. Story by: Larry Cohen. Directed by: Roland Jaffe. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A world famous model, Jennifer (Cuthbert), is drugged at a club one night, and captured by a strange assailant. He holds her captive in an underground cell, along with another prisoner, Gary (Gillies), and subjects his victims to torture. Jennifer comes to trust Gary during their captivity, but learns that he is working with the abductor, and is, in fact, his brother. Now Jennifer must outwit both of her tormentors and flee her personal prison.

COMMENTARY: A prime example of the “torture porn” sub-genre, *Captivity* concerns a model played by 24’s Elisha Cuthbert, who is captured and forced to undergo terrible suffering at the hands of her assailant. Unlike the excellent *Martyrs*, however, *Captivity* doesn’t suggest that there is a deeper human meaning behind this brutality, or an opportunity for transcendence. Instead, the film seems to work on a principle similar to the Stockholm Syndrome. Instead of sympathizing with her captor, however, Jennifer comes to sympathize with her companion in prison, Gary. This seems to be part of the overall “gaslighting” plan, as Jennifer lowers her defenses and has sexual intercourse with Gary before realizing that he is in on the whole thing and playing her like a piano. Given this plot line, it is reasonable to include this movie as part of the “*men behaving badly*” catalog of the 2000s, a group including titles such as *What Lies Beneath*, *Gothika*, *Shutter*, and *Hard Candy*.

Captivity raises some questions of plausibility and in execution. For example, Jennifer is so well-known a model that she featured in literally every ad seen in the film’s first act. She’s obviously world famous, yet Jennifer has no entourage of hangers-on, she drives herself around, and works alone late at night. None of this seems likely, given her high profile. At the very least, Jennifer would have a personal assistant, or an agent, accompanying her. And in terms of *Captivity*’s execution, a key artifact at the end of the film shows the villainous brothers in their childhood, forming their bond of co-dependency and villainy. Now ask the question: who was filming this home movie?

This author does not reflexively dismiss torture porn as a format. Torture porn arose at a specific point in our culture and for specific reasons. It has the same right to exist as slasher films, found footage films or any sub-genre one can think of, and if vetted well, like some of the *Saw* films, *Hostel*, or *Martyrs*, torture porn reveals much about our culture, and proves thematically valuable. The events that occur in *Captivity* to Jennifer, and the other captives are utterly horrific. At the movie’s start, someone is encased in Plaster of Paris, and then sledge-hammered. Another victim has her face melted off. Jennifer is forced to drink a concoction consisting of human tongue, eyeballs and other various disgusting sundries. The worst “experiment” that Jennifer undergoes finds her having to choose between saving herself, or a cute dog named Suzie. This material is all tremendously gory, but it is difficult to express that it is overly debauching or terrible, given other movies of the decade.

On a very basic level, *Captivity* speaks to the very reason that torture porn was so popular in the 2000s. This movie deals with the reckoning that not all people are trustworthy, and that to escape alive from a terrible situation, there have to be sacrifices made. But in doing that, what is the morality? We would all likely choose ourselves to survive, at the cost of a dog’s life, but how would we feel about ourselves, afterwards? This idea can be applied to the culture at large. How do we feel about mistreating prisoners of war, ones who have not been formally convicted of charges? They might be terrorists (or they might not) but they are still human beings. And in terms of “captivity” there are still people at Gitmo awaiting trial, 20 years after 9/11. Jennifer also must face a future of imprisonment with no foreseeable way out. She can’t depend on legal norms or authority to save her, and the film reveals what happens to police who try to free her. So, one can decry the brutality and darkness of the film, but at the same time, they should be prepared to decry the brutality and darkness of the era, and the society that gave rise to it.

Cuthbert is appealing as the lead, and audiences want to see her escape and exact revenge, especially after Gary tricks her into sexual intercourse. The whole point behind the imprisonment and torture here seems to be for the brothers to have their way with women whom, pretty clearly, they would not have access to in normal society. So, they take women, trick women, and torture women, to make them comply. Again, this is a very 2010s idea. That’s the time in our history when some men, self-

identified as “incels” (involuntary celibates), believe they have the right to control women’s bodies.

Captivity occurs mostly in one setting, the underground dungeon/cell, and is filmed in lurid shades of green and red. It is an upsetting and unpleasant film, but is relatively well-made compared to, for instance, *See No Evil*. There is some evidence of re-shoots and tinkering with the story, but on the modest terms the film sets out for itself, *Captivity* holds the attention, is occasionally provocative, and reflects perfectly where American society was three years into the “War on Terror.”

Dead Silence * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“*Silence* is this year’s *Darkness Falls*—a good premise wasted in a mess of flat acting, minimal character development and filmmaking which ranges between quirkily inspired and surprisingly clunky.”—Garth Franklin, *Dark Horizons*, March 16, 2007.

“...decent, somewhat wooden entry in the underutilized area of ventriloquist dolls in the horror movie genre.”—Staci Layne Wilson, *About.com*, March 18, 2007.

“There is some good, original gore here for blood fans, but while the filmmakers understand intellectually that dolls ... can be quite creepy, they don’t know how to maximize this onscreen.”—Abbie Bernstein, *iF Magazine*, March 19, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Ryan Kwanten (Jamie Ashen); Amber Valletta (Ella Ashen); Donnie Wahlberg (Det. Lipton); Michael Fairman (Henry Walker); Joan Heney (Marion Walker); Bob Gunton (Edward Ashen); Laura Regan (Lisa Ashen); Dmitry Chepovetsky (Richard Walker); Judith Roberts (Mary Shaw); Keir Gilchrist (Young Henry); Steven Taylor (Michael Ashen); David Talbot (Priest); Steve Adams (Detective).

CREW: Universal Pictures presents *Dead Silence*. Casting: Barbara Fiorentino, Linda Lamontagne, Rebecca Mangieri, Wendy Weldman. Production Designer: Julie Berghoff. Costume Designer: Denise Cronenberg. Special Effects: Warren Appleby, Universal, Mr. X Inc. Music: Charlie Clouser. Director of Photography: John R. Leonetti. Film Editor: Michael N. Knue. Producers: Mark Burg, Gregg Hoffman, Oren Koules. Executive Producer: Peter Oillataguerre. Story by: James Wan, Leigh Whannell. Written by: Leigh Whannell. Directed by: James Wan. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: One night, Jamie Ashen (Kwanten) and his wife, Lisa (Regan), receive an unusual gift: a ventriloquist’s doll. The doll murders Lisa, and Jamie is suspected of having committed the crime, spurring an investigation from a dogged detective, Lipton (Wahlberg). Hoping to clear his name and learn the truth behind his wife’s murder, Jamie heads back to his hometown, Raven’s Fair. There, he explores the town’s local myth and boogeyman figure, Mary Shaw, and the crime that took her life years earlier. Jamie comes to learn how his family was involved in Mary’s story, and he uncovers further dark secrets at the abandoned Theater on the Lake.

COMMENTARY: Do you suffer from *automatonophobia*—an unhealthy fear of dolls and other self-operating ... things? If so, the effectiveness of the 2007 horror film, *Dead Silence* gets ratcheted up by a few degrees. This horror film from the producers of *Saw* involves, among other things, a ventriloquist’s dummy named Billy who has an uncomfortable way of staring you down. And that’s just when he isn’t popping around doing the murderous bidding of his mistress of the damned, a dead witch named Mary Shaw. In *Dead Silence*, these villains combat a young man named Jamie Ashen (Kwanten), who, after the death of his wife, Lisa, hopes to learn the secret of Mary Shaw in his desolate, half-abandoned hometown, Raven’s Fair.

Dead Silence opens with the old-fashioned, black-and-white logo of Universal Pictures from the 1940s, and this is an entirely appropriate touch. For much of its running time, the film plays out like a good, scary horror film of that historical era. To heighten the connection to that bygone epoch, the makers of the film have de-saturated the movie's color palette to such a degree that mostly silver and gray pre-dominate. Oh, and *blood red* too ... which comes in handy in the final act. And when the much-too courageous Jamie walks a lonely graveyard by moon light, the image on screen is almost entirely black-and-white, and again, successfully evokes the chilling style of yesteryear. This visual approach reflects the specifics of the narrative, because 1941 is the year of Mary Shaw's debut at a "Lost Theater" in Raven's Fair. We see this event played out in an ultra-creepy flashback; one in which a child heckles Mary Shaw and her "dummy" on stage, only to face the witch's wrath.

And that brings us to another point about *Dead Silence* that I admired. The plot (and the scares, too) reach right down in the well of childhood; to that dreamy, half-forgotten place where irrational dread lurks and *flourishes*. It's the fear that—as you sleep—your human-looking toys actually have a life and agenda of their own. And that they are watching you, as you shiver under the bed covers and contemplate their presence just feet away. This touch, childhood nightmares revisited as adults, is a commonly seen one in the 2000s, already parsed in such efforts as *Darkness Falls* and *Boogeyman*. This film even considerably provides a childhood poem that, much like Freddy's jump rope song in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise (*One, two, Freddy's coming for you...*) tells of a "real" terror in terms a child understands: *a fairy tale*, a song, a lullaby. It goes: "*Beware the stare of Mary Shaw. She had no children only dolls. And if you see her in your dreams. Be sure to never ever scream....*"

Unfortunately, *Dead Silence* also appropriates Freddy's back-story and motivation for Mary Shaw. After she is murdered by the townspeople for her bad behavior, her evil spirit returns (along with the monstrous dolls) for vengeance (delivering the sins of the fathers and mothers upon the heads of the children). This act of cinematic thievery (or is it homage?) gets a pass though, because of the film's visual approach. The Lost Theater is a remarkable setting, perfectly and creepily visualized, and the scene in which we learn that one character has been hollowed out and made into a puppet, is wonderfully in the school of grand guignol.

Given all this material, and the thoughtful approach to it, for the most part, the third act of *Dead Silence* is disastrously and inextricably bad. Donnie Wahlberg plays (badly) a cop who is suspicious of Jamie. So suspicious, in fact, that he leaves his jurisdiction and follows him to another town. Then when he finds him, the cop doesn't arrest his quarry. Also, the events that caused Mary Shaw to be lynched involved the disappearance of Michael Ashen, whose body was never found. But when Jamie goes looking at the theater, he finds the body without even half-trying. No one in the town ever thought of looking there? At the theater where his transgression (calling out Mary) actually occurred? Mary also takes the form a clown doll at one point. Is there a reason for this selection, besides the fact that clowns are considered scary? Why did she pick this particular doll and how does it fit into her mission (to silence all those who silence her?).

Despite some questions like these, many aspects of the film still achieve a real sense of grotesque horror. The opening twelve minutes of the picture—in which Jamie and his wife Lisa are interrupted by the delivery at their doorstep (not a baby, but a ventriloquist's dummy named Billy)—are superb: a mini-classic set-piece that elicits real chills and goosebumps. The director, James Wan, proves remarkably skilled at manipulating foreground and background elements in his compositions in a manner that will make you anxious and disturbed. The movie's sound design also assists enormously in generating a mood of terror. The "Dead Silence" of the title is a sort of "draining away of all noise," a phenomenon that occurs at the inauguration of all supernatural events in the film. The sound slows down, fades away, and we're left in still, portentous quiet, *aware that the next strike is due any second*. Another scare scene in a motel room—lit neon red—and the virtuoso surprise ending also significantly boost the film's quality, even though the central performances are only adequate, and the storyline drags badly in the final third of the movie.

If one is seeking an interesting modern companion piece to *Devil Doll* (1964) or the non-supernatural *Magic* (1978), *Dead Silence* delivers. If you're not really bothered or unnerved by

ambulatory, big-eyed dolls, however, your mileage on this one may vary. The problem may just be that beyond the superior images and jump scares, the film doesn't delve deeply into psychology or sub-text. *Dead Silence* looks very much like the later (and more popular) efforts from the same team, namely *Insidious* and *The Conjuring*. And like those films, *Dead Silence* is technically well-made and exquisitely executed, even if there is nothing real deep going on in terms of theme.

Disturbia ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“The script seems to want to make some kind of statement about suburbia and about voyeurism.... The question is whether he [Kale] can emerge his essentially decent quality qualities still intact or will his house arrest be as psychologically damaging as a real prison stint.”—Steve Biodrowski, *Cinefantastique*, April 13, 2007.

“...the voyeuristic commentary really comes into play. If we are watching something, as opposed to experiencing it ourselves, we are creating a new reality. We use inference and sometimes miss context, thus creating something new.... Towards the end *Disturbia* does unravel ... but that doesn't stop the first two acts from being a slick little observation on the multiple levels of reality that surround us today.”—Ryan Cracknell, *Movie Views*, August 3, 2007.

“...a dead-on portrait of the current teenage generation's obsession with media and media technology.”—James Kendrick, *Q Network Film Desk*, April 25, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Shia LaBeouf (Kale); Sarah Roemer (Ashley); Carrie-Ann Moss (Julie); David Morse (Mr. Turner); Aaron Roo (Ronnie); Jose Pablo Cantillo (Officer Gutierrez); Matt Craven (Detect Parker); Brandon Caruso, Luciano Rauso, Daniel Caruso (Greenwood Boys); Kevin Quinn (Mr. Carlson); Elyse Mirto (Mrs. Carlson).

CREW: DreamWorks, Cold Spring Pictures present a Montecito Picture Company Production, *Disturbia*. Casting: Deborah Aquila, Tricia Wood. Production Designer: Tom Southwell. Costume Designer: Marie-Sylvie Devau. Special Effects: KNB EF Group, Halon Entertainment. Music: Geoff Zanelli. Director of Photography: Rogier Stoffers. Film Editor: Jim Page. Producers: Jackie Marcus, Joe Medjuck, E. Bennett Walsh. Executive Producers: Tom Pollock, Ivan Reitman. Story by: Christopher Landon. Written by: Christopher Landon, Carl Ellsworth. Directed by: D.J. Caruso. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young man named Kale (LaBeouf) has seen his life go badly off track after the horrifying death of his father in a car accident. Now Kale is angry at the world and, in a fit of anger, “pops” his irritating high school Spanish teacher in the face. He is spared incarceration, but Kale is placed under house arrest for the spell of one year. His mother takes away his I-Tunes, cuts the wire on his flat screen television, and takes away Kale's video games. At a loss without his technology, Kale begins to obsessively spy on the neighbors, including a young woman named Ashley (Roemer) who's just moved into town, and a man named Robert Turner (Morse), whom Kale comes to believe is a serial killer. Kale ropes Ashley into his beliefs about Turner, which in turn makes Turner angry, and suspicious of the young man.

COMMENTARY: The year 2007 saw an attempt to bring old-school Hitchcock-style tropes to the horror thriller in efforts such as (the superior) *Vacancy* and this film, *Disturbia*. In *Disturbia*, Kale spends much of his time sitting in his bedroom, legs propped up (and he has one of those ankle monitors on), looking through binoculars at the world outside his house. Long-time horror fans will recognize the set-up as being very reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954).

But going down any list of Hitchcockian principles, *Disturbia* clearly adheres to the master's favorite obsession, specifically voyeurism. In this film, voyeurism plays out with a bored teenager indulging his burgeoning sexual interest by peeking at a would-be girlfriend in a bikini or athletically undergoing yoga in her room. He also happens to catch sight of that killer, a character like Norman

Bates, who hides a sexual aberration in the plain sight of suburbia.

Here, the voyeurism is achingly high-tech, with an almost fetishistic focus on the technology of the 21st century (cell phone cameras, DV cameras, I-Pods, etc.) and how it all can be marshaled to spy on others. Indeed, the film posits a new kind of life in the year 2008, when technology of many types permits a person to reach out and connect with the world in a variety of ways. Kale becomes a voyeur, in fact, because his Mother takes his other tech away from him. He can't play video games or watch television.

Even his imprisonment, oddly, is technological. There are no literal bars keeping Kale in a cell, or in his home. Instead he is shackled with that ankle bracelet, which reports his location to the police station. So *Disturbia* starts with the *Rear Window* principle of voyeurism that leaps into the new world of 21st century-technology.

Another principle of the Hitchcock aesthetic is gallows humor, and, largely, *Disturbia* gets that right too. It possesses a sense of humor about its story and characters. There's a wonderful scene here that finds Kale spying on Robert Turner. Kale is lying flat on his chest in his yard, peeking through a slit in a wooden fence (voyeurism again.). Suddenly, on the opposite side of the fence, Robert begins talking. "*What are you doing in my garden?*" He asks playfully. He approaches, coming closer to the fence, still talking, and the audience is sure he has seen Kale, and is addressing him directly. How the scene plays out is somewhat different, and actually highly amusing. It is both tense and funny, and Hitchcock likely would have approved. This scene is an example of his famous edict (and advice to other filmmakers) to play the audience like a piano.

Where *Disturbia* fails to be truly Hitchcockian is in terms of execution. The film doesn't ascend to that higher level of artistry where the shots tell us about the characters and their predicament. In that sense, the visualization, save for an adrenalin-provoking "night vision" race through the killer's house, is pretty uninspired and routine. Also, whereas *Vacancy* boasts the good sense to get out of Dodge as quickly as possible at 82 minutes, *Disturbia* is 104 minutes, and takes unnecessary detours into blind narrative alleys. I mean, does the audience really care about the neighborhood kids who tease Kale? These moments merely lessen the suspense; make the whole enterprise more diffuse. On the other hand, they also involve technology, and in particular, the kids' secret viewing of porno films, so perhaps that was the purpose the filmmakers intended.

Finally, Hitchcock always understood how to square the circle, bringing his films together in a way that there were no loose ends (unless he wanted you to ponder the loose ends, as in the conclusion of *The Birds*). But *Disturbia* makes goofy errors that leave the audience yelling at the screen. For instance, Kale's friend Ronnie (Yoo) disappears into the killer's house, and Kale breaks his house arrest to attempt to rescue him. He runs over, lunges into the house and searches for his friend. The police respond and arrest Kale, the wrong guy (*mistaken identity*—another Hitchcockian obsession!). However, Kale just can't convince the cops that his friend is in danger. They drag him away, and we are left to wonder what has become of Ronnie. Well ... why doesn't Kale simply ring Ronnie's cell phone, which he had on him in the house? The ringer on the phone would have proven conclusively where Ronnie was, and confirmed or shit-canned Kale's story. But this "tech smart" kid never even thinks of that, and that's a whole big enough to drive a Mack truck through. On one hand, the movie asks us to believe the kid is a technical genius (we see him up-fitting a DV camera at one point), and then on the other hand, the movie wants the audience to believe the kid would forget to use a cell phone.

Finally, and no doubt this is an odd thing to mention, *Disturbia* at times plays like a non-supernatural remake of the 1985 vampire film *Fright Night*. That film saw a teenager, Charlie, also acting as a voyeur, looking out from his bedroom window at the world beyond. He came to believe that his next-door neighbor, Jerry Dandrige, was actually a vampire and responsible for several reports of missing women. When Jerry learned of Charlie's suspicions, he visited Charlie's house, and met his Mom, implicitly threatening Charlie with his Mother's life. Without exaggeration, this exact chain of events occurs in *Disturbia*. Kale sees reports on TV of missing women. He suspects his next-door neighbor, Turner. And when Turner learns of Kale's suspicions, he comes over for a visit and implicitly threatens the life of his mother.

A whole chunk of this movie is ported in directly from *Fright Night*.

Still *Disturbia* isn't a bad movie, taken in total. It certainly speaks to the culture's growing obsession with home technology, and how that technology can be used to invade privacy. With lines like "Soon you'll be the most popular video on YouTube," it certainly predicts the direction of the 2010s, and the youth obsession with posting every experience online, from videos to snapshots of meals eaten.

One must wonder what Hitchcock would have thought of that.

Fido * * *

Critical Reception

"The satire of Currie's spirited zom-com is not so much sneaked in as ingeniously worked out through a thoroughly imagined alternate universe where the paternal smiles of authority figures hide an unchecked police state keeping the gated communities white middle class compliant. He can't sustain the creative pace through the film, but he never lets the commentary overwhelm the humor, and the echoes of Douglas Sirk melodramas and Lassie movies just add to the fun."—Sean Axmaker, *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*: "Go ahead and laugh: Zombies are loyal servants in the fetching comedy, *Fido*." July 5, 2007.

"It's just a clever, pointed little fable about the price of complacent conformity, slavish worship of the status quo, and trading freedom for the illusion of safety, wrapped in a sugary-sweet, Jordan-almond-colored coating that looks good enough to eat."—Maitland McDonagh, *TV Guide*, June 15, 2007.

"...Currie is better at laughs than scares, but he can't sustain either..."—Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone*, June 14, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: David Kaye (Narrator); Billy Connolly (Fido); Carrie-Anne Moss (Helen Robinson); Dylan Baker (Bill Robinson); Jan Skorzewski (Eating Zombie); Kevin Tyell (Zombie's Victim); Andy Parkin (Dr. Geiger); Gary Slater (Father Zombie); Taylor Petri (Little Girl); Tiffany Lyndall-Knight (Miss Mills); K'Sun Ray (Timmy Robinson); Alexia Fast (Cindy Bottoms); Henry Czerny (Mr. Bottoms); Aaron Brown (Roy Fraser); Brandon Olds (Stan Fraser); Jennifer Clement (Dee Dee Bottoms); Tim Blake Nelson (Mr. Theopolis); Sonja Bennett (Tammy); Mary Black (Mrs. Henderson); Bernard Cuffling (Mr. Henderson); Michael P. Northey (Joe Peterson); Rob LaBelle (Murphy);

CREW: Lion's Gate films, Anagram Pictures, Astral Media and Chum Television presents *Fido*. Casting: Lynne Carrow, Heidi Levitt. Costume Designer: Mary E. McLeod. Production Designer: Rob Gray. Music: Dan Macdonald. Special Effects: MastersFX, SPIMN West VFX. Director of Photography: Dan Kiesser. Film Editor: Roger Mattiussi. Producer: Blake Corbet, Mary Anne Waterhouse. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Patrick Cassavetti, Shelley Gillen, Daniel Iron. Based on an original story by: Dennis Heaton. Written by: Robert Chomiak, Andrew Currie, Dennis Heaton. Directed by: Andrew Currie. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After the Zombie Wars, humanity and America, specifically, has re-established themselves (behind a wall) as a patriarchal, 1950s type world. However, there is one abnormal addition to that normal 1950s life. Zombies, rendered docile by special collars from ZomCom, serve as servants in the society. The Henderson family acquires a zombie named Fido (Connolly), who develops a friendship with young Timmy (Ray). However, when Fido's collar is removed, he returns to his zombie nature and an outbreak threatens the safety of suburbia. By now, however, Fido is part of the family.

COMMENTARY: *Fido* is an affectionate and clever zombie film that sends up American society of the 1950s. In this case, a dangerous zombie named Fido is brought into a suburban, *Father Knows Best*

(1954–1960)–type-neighborhood and serves as both a pet (like Lassie) and a domestic servant (thus representing a minority underclass).

Fido's presence, however, changes the family. For the son, Timmy, Fido is an object of curiosity and, soon, a friend. For Timmy's mother, Helen, Fido's presence is an invitation to experience a world beyond the narrow rituals and mores of the restrictive, patriarchal suburbs. For ZomCom, however, Fido may be a threat to the social order that has thrived by walling off the outside world.

Fido creates a fictional corollary for 1950s America through many carefully conceived details. The film has a post-war setting, not World War II, in this case, but the Zombie Wars. Also, America, post-war, has adopted a policy of "containment." This is precisely how the United States and its allies, post-World War II, dealt with the countries of the Soviet Bloc, attempting to contain the dangers of communism through embargoes and barriers such as the Berlin Wall. In the film, ZomCom promises "*a better life through containment*" (in a propagandistic black-and-white film that opens the movie), and zombies, like communists once were, are built-up as inhuman, soulless monsters who jeopardize the American way of life. "*They might seem human, but they have only one goal,*" notes one character: "*to eat your flesh.*"

The zombie stands-in not just for a foreign enemy, the commies, but for any outsider or "other" not welcome in white suburbia. The neighborhood is all atwitter, for example, about a neighbor who has taken a zombie mistress. *What will people say?! Fido's* money shot, of course, is a composition which shows blood spattered over a white picket fence, a symbol for Norman Rockwell-ish Americana. The implication seems to be that the suburbs are well-acquainted with violence, or a mess, because containment isn't a practical strategy for dealing with diversity, even in the zombie apocalypse.

Fido features lots of funny little touches, like the propaganda film at the movie's start. There's a magazine, for example, titled DEATH, instead of LIFE. And, in a scene that seems straight out of 1950s sitcoms such as *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963), a white suburban family laments expenses, with the patriarch noting, "*We can't afford a zombie!*"

Fido is not a conventional horror film. It features plenty of blood and guts, and the most popular monster of the decade, the zombie, but its mission is not to scare or terrify audiences, but to convince audiences to see the parochial, closed-off nature of America in the 1950s, a time that many politicians claim a fondness and affection for, and would like the country to return to. Yet the picture painted in *Fido*, whether one looks at zombies as communists or minorities, is one of conformity, rigidity and prejudice and therefore real limitations.

Fido is often funny, occasionally too on the nose, and quite charming, but it likely preaches to the choir. Any viewer who watches a horror movie parody of 1950s life and sitcoms of this nature likely already understands how that world was exclusive, unjust, and deeply monolithic. Still, the film is clever, and part of a cycle in the late 20th and early 21st century—in films such as *Pleasantville* (1998) and *Far from Heaven* (2002)—that took on the "myth" of the American suburbs as a paradisaical place.

1408 * * *

Critical Reception

"It provides plenty of old-school chills and a good bit of humor..."—Matt Soergel, *Florida Times Union*: "Room Disservice," June 22, 2007, page WE-9.

"In the grand scheme of things, the Dolphin Hotel is no Overlook, but it's no cheesy slaughter motel either."—Caina Chocano, *Los Angeles Times*: "1408 harbors a doom with a view," June 22, 2007, page E8.

Cast & Crew

CAST: John Cusack (Mike Enslin); Samuel L. Jackson (Gerald Olin); Tony Shalhoub (Sam Farrell); Len

Cariou (Mr. Enslin); Jessica Anthony (Katie); Walter Lewis (Book Store Cashier); Mary McCormack (Lily); Paul Kasey (Kevin O'Malley).

CREW: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Dimension films presents *1408*. Casting: Elaine Grainger. Costume Designer: Natalie Ward. Production Designer: Andrew Laws. Music: Gabriel Yared. Special Effects: MPC, Rainmaker, The Senate Visual Effects, Baseblack Visual Effects. Director of Photography: Benoit Delhomme. Film Editor: Peter Boyle. Producer: Lorenzo di Bonaventura. Executive Producers: Jake Myers, Richard Sapirstein, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. Based on the short story by: Stephen King. Written by: Matt Greenberg, Scott Alexander, Larry Karaszewski. Directed by: Mikael Håström. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Sometime after the death of his daughter and dissolution of his marriage, once-promising writer Mike Enslin (Cusack) makes a cynical living debunking haunted locations across America. He checks into the Dolphin Hotel in New York City to debunk an evil room there, #1408. No one who has stayed in the room has “*lasted longer than an hour*” in this so-called “*evil fucking room*.” The hotel’s manager, Olin (Jackson), attempts to discourage Enslin from staying there, in a room where there have been 222 natural deaths and a total of 56 deaths over the years. Enslin is unconvinced, and noting that his “*readers expect the truth*,” enters the room. He spends a night there that forces him to confront evil, his own past and the death of his child.

COMMENTARY: *1408* is both a good film and a disappointing one, in some fashion. The film features a sharp, even sizzling performance by the always-provocative Samuel L. Jackson, and an increasingly terrifying atmosphere, set in a contained, claustrophobic setting: a small hotel suite. Yet as much as these elements contribute to an effective and enjoyable picture, *1408* never feels new, fresh, or most importantly, dangerous. It is a grab-bag of elements that Stephen King has utilized in his writing many times before, and in better ways.

A common motif or umbrella of consistency across a body of work is a good thing for any creator. When an author or director returns to the same type or brand of material, it isn’t necessarily a “rehash,” but rather an obsession. It can be viewed as part of that author’s galvanizing motivation to create art, a passion for a type or brand or narrative, or even theme.

Accordingly, *1408*, like *Secret Window* or *The Dark Half*, casts a struggling writer as its protagonist. The tragic death of a child, a plot element from *Pet Sematary*, also recurs in *1408*. Similarly, a haunted hotel is the famous stalking grounds of evil in *The Shining* and in this story as well. Perhaps, it depends on how one views the matter, but consistency and familiar elements can be viewed either as part of an author’s brand, or one can gaze at such familiarity in terms of horror efficacy.

In horror films, familiarity breeds contempt.

The more often one sees a familiar or known quantity—a plotline, a boogeyman, a familiar setting, even—the less it possesses the ability to truly scare an audience or reader. Inherently, humans fear those things they haven’t seen, or aren’t familiar with.

What’s scary? The unknown.

Something that starts as familiar, and then treads into the unfamiliar.

1408 is undeniably a solid film, hence the rating of 3 stars, but also a known quantity from a known writer, with little in terms of shock or surprise or genuine unpredictability. It is very well-made, entertaining, and well-played, but ultimately too familiar to be anything other than a mindless good time at the movies.

Let’s put it this way: no one is going to be making a documentary about this film, in 30 years, about the secret codes or meaning lurking in *1408*. Again, different strokes for different folks, but this is a thoroughly mainstream, safe horror movie featuring a lot of Stephen King touchstones. Obviously, millions (if not billions) of people love the author’s writing and approach, this writer included, and film is an art form for the masses.

So, it makes sense that filmmakers, working on a budget, would aim for a relatively mainstream

approach. If the reader wants more Stephen King-verse, here's *1408* which provides that.

Yet, Stephen King film adaptations go back to the 1970s, and fairly or not, each new adaptation has that remarkable history to live up to. This film is not in the top tier of King adaptations, which includes *The Shining*, *Carrie* (1976), *The Dead Zone* (1981) and *Misery* (1990). Nor is it in the under-appreciated classic tier that includes Carpenter's *Christine* (1983), Romero's *The Dark Half* (1991), or Teague's go-for-broke *Cujo* (1982). In terms of the decade's King films, *1408* is worlds better than *Dreamcatcher*, and not quite at the level of *Secret Window* or *The Mist*.

1408 is fine. It's good. It's perfectly enjoyable. It doesn't waste your time. You won't be debauched for watching.

It also isn't anything that will challenge your perception of reality, the world, or what a Stephen King movie looks and feels like.

1408 is an agreeable place holder till a better King film arrives (see: *It* [2017]) and a nicely made mass entertainment rather than anything approaching a memorable horror film.

Cruel?

My readers expect the truth.

Grindhouse Presents: Death Proof * * *

Critical Reception

"...so profoundly dull, so relentlessly misguided, so criminally self-indulgent you almost feel bad criticizing it."—David Edwards, *Daily Mirror*, September 21, 2007.

"No seatbelt, no airbag, no nuthin'—just Tarantino driving wildly under the influence."—Damon Wise, *Empire Magazine*, September 21, 2007.

"Poor audiences in 2007 often didn't know what to make of the *Grindhouse* double feature of *Death Proof* and *Planet Terror* which was a shame, but I suppose we really shouldn't be all that surprised. Grindhouse theaters were a big city thing and not everyone lived in big cities. I remember the 42nd Street theaters in NYC—smoky, smelly, and loud—talking to the screen seemed a requirement.

Of the two films, *Death Proof* is my preferred film, it's probably the best action film of Tarantino's career, it lets Tarantino indulge in some of his seemingly pointless extended dialogue scenes, and the performances are all great, especially Kurt Russell in one of my favorite roles of his career—playing what is essentially Snake Plissken's worthless cousin. More interesting, however, is to see Russell's character's lineage to Brad Pitt's in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*—Tarantino loves stunt men as characters, and this is his version of stuntman as slasher/killer. *Death Proof* has just enough connection to revenge films like *Last House on the Left* that it seems to be riffing on multiple genres (even if only for moments). This is an underappreciated gem in the Tarantino catalogue."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kurt Russell (Stuntman Mike); Zoë Bell (Zoë Bell); Rosario Dawson (Abernathy); Vanessa Ferlito (Arlene); Sydney Poitier (Jungle Julia); Tracie Thoms (Kim); Rose McGowan (Pam); Jordan Ladd (Shanna); Mary Elizabeth Winstead (Lee); Quentin Tarantino (Warren); Marcy Harriell (Marcy); Eli Roth (Dov); Omar Doom (Nate); Michael Bacall (Omar); Monica Staggs (Lanna Frank); Michael Parks (Earl McGraw); James Parks (Edgar McGraw); Nicky Katt (Counter Guy).

CREW: Dimension Films, Troublemaker Studios, Rodriguez International Pictures and the Weinstein Company present *Death Proof*. Casting: Mary Vernieu. Production Designer: Steve Joyner. Costume Designer: Nina Proctor. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, The Orphanage, Inc. Director of Photography: Quentin Tarantino. Film Editor: Sally Menke. Producers: Elizabeth Avellan, Robert Rodriguez, Erica Steinberg, Quentin Tarantino. Executive Producers: Shannon McIntosh, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. Written and Directed by: Quentin Tarantino. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 117 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Austin, Texas, a psychotic stuntman named Mike (Kurt Russell) stalks a group of young women late one night. He befriends them at a local bar, even though he creeps them out. Later that night, Mike uses his tricked-out movie stunt car—"death proofed" for his continued survival—to murder them all on a dark road. Fourteen months later, Mike is up to his old and murderous tricks, and he stalks another car full of lovely young women, including Zoe (Bell), and Abernathy (Dawson). This time, however, Mike has selected the wrong targets. Two of the women in the car are experienced movie stuntwomen and can go toe-to-toe with his death car, as well as any vehicular damage Mike seeks to mete out.

COMMENTARY: In 2014, director Quentin Tarantino called *Death Proof* (2007)—originally on a *Grindhouse* double bill with *Planet Terror*—his weakest film. This surprising claim prompted much re-examination, and there are actually two-ways to approach this film, and each one yielding different—and even contradictory—results.

If a viewer approaches *Death Proof* cold or unprepared it emerges as wildly self-indulgent. At nearly two-hours in duration, the film is bloated, repetitive, and ultimately somewhat baffling as a work of art. Furthermore, if the overriding idea here was simply to create a 70s-style exploitation film for the 21st century, *Death Proof* is a bust.

On the other hand, if one contextualizes *Death Proof* as the master work of a talent who "lives and breathes" the movies and sets his films in a kind of movie-centric alternate "universe," the film works much more successfully.

In short, *Death Proof* doesn't seek to be realistic—or set in the real world—for even a second. It doesn't even wish, honestly, to be judged as a coherent amalgamation of grindhouse style. Instead, *Death Proof* depicts a story set in a world wherein movie history and movie "laws" determine absolutely everything. Thus, it's a movie about movie physics, not real-life physics. Similarly, it's a movie about movie villains, not realistic ones, and on and on.



Don't get in his car! Kurt Russell is Stuntman Mike in Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof* (2007), the first half of the *Grindhouse* double feature.

Is this a far-fetched reading? Given the precedent of Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), a fantasy film which offered an alternate—and movie-centric—ending for World War II that doesn't conform to the historical record, perhaps not. So, if the film is approached with an understanding that it occurs in an alternate “movie”-centric universe, *Death Proof* is much more fun to reckon with, and much more coherent in terms of its artistry.

If the game is to go after *Death Proof* for self-indulgence and artistic contradictions, one can indeed have a field day. The *Grindhouse* experiment was designed to *visually* recreate an era in exploitation (and movie-going experiences), and so *Death Proof* features scratched and grainy prints, black-and-white and color reels jumbled together, and a number of shot-to-shot discontinuities, like characters holding drinking cups in one composition but not in the reverse angle shot. Even the title card is a mess, with *Death Proof* awkwardly replacing “*Thunderbolt*” as the title after a split second.

The problem here is that, given film technology as it exists today, movies—even bad ones—don't look like this. And because the characters drive 21st-century vehicles in some cases and use cellphones to send text/e-mail messages to one another, it is clear that *Death Proof* is set *now*.

Why not actually set it in the 1970s, without these modern affectations, so the movie could seem like a legitimate “found” film from the disco era? Because taken together—1970s-style screen affectations with a 2000s world—the movie just doesn't come together in a way that it should. Instead, the visual jokes about bad-filmmaking and damaged prints seem half-assed. This feeling is augmented by the fact that the last portions of the film—an amazing car chase—are brilliantly choreographed, executed and edited. A low-budget regional filmmaker (like, say, the great William Girdler) could not have pulled off something like that with his budgets.

So—to its apparent detriment—*Death Proof* doesn't even stick with its opening “meme” about bad-filmmaking. The “badness” of the print and of the editing recedes dramatically by the film's climax, essentially abandoned as a leitmotif.

Structurally, *Death Proof* has a problem to consider as well. The first hour, which features characters such as Arlene and Julia, is strong. Their smart dialogue—while ultimately meaningless in terms of the narrative—portrays them as fun, unique individuals. But then every character in this interlude dies horribly, and the audience is presented a second, less-interesting group of female characters who also talk at length about matters that ultimately don't move the plot forward. The story repeats itself, and much of the energy coming out of the diabolical “vehicular homicide” scene bleeds out of the picture.

Instead of ramping up, the movie cycles down.

Finally, as a distillation of the Tarantino aesthetic *Death Proof* showcases the artist's arrested development. We get women performing seductive lap-dances, women showcasing their bare feet (ad infinitum), and women in tight, revealing clothing. Ultimately, such attractive women triumph over the evil man, Stuntman Mike, but they do so by being as brutal and monstrous as he has been. If one seeks a straight-on message here, that's it: *revenge*.

Women are ogle-worthy, have great and gorgeous feet, and are just as violent and murderous as men are. This has been interpreted as a feminist message, and yet if so, it is a deeply juvenile one. More accurately, *Death Proof* can be distilled to the idea that Tarantino loves hot women who can be just as bad ass as men. And by being bad ass, this author means murderous.

So, there's that.

Here's the contrary and positive reading of the film. *Death Proof* is the work of an artist who inhales movies like they are his oxygen. Seen from this perspective, the inconsistent use of film scratches, grain, color, and editing discontinuities alongside modern technology like cell phones isn't bothersome at all. If this film is set in an “exploitation” universe, then all the budgetary, creative, and distribution problems of grindhouse movies could, conceivably have continued right up until now. Thus, *Death Proof* is an alternate universe story in the same way that *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) is. It takes place in a realm where the universe—not just movies—is grindhouse.

And in this universe, every moment is a virtual replay or extension of other movie moments. For instance, Butterfly, or Arlene, spends the day leading up to her death seeing Stuntman Mike's black car parked nearby. It keeps re-appearing at different scenes, and so she experiences the sense that something

is wrong, and that she is being stalked. These moments very clearly reflect a slasher film ethos, but more than that, reflect, in particular, John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). There, a final girl, Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), kept seeing Michael Myers' car during the course of a day, and so she too began to sense danger. But this idea—or cliché—of the insightful final girl is overturned because Butterfly does not survive her encounter with her Boogeyman (who is also named Mike, actually). And furthermore, Butterfly's death may come about because of her highly sexualized lap dance for him at the bar.

To wit: Tarantino knows his film history, and he knows his horror films. The girls who act in a “sexualized” fashion in old fashioned horror movies typically don't survive. So, Arlene, or Butterfly in a sense, forsakes her final girl status with that lap dance (which Julia advises her not to proceed with) and dies before the night is through.

Another scene, involving elaborate and extensive exposition delivered by two colorful Texas lawmen similarly evokes the oeuvre of Brian De Palma, namely a scene in *Raising Cain* (1992), wherein two characters, a detective and a therapist, confer at length about the psychological nature of Carter Nixon (John Lithgow). Here, the police discuss Stuntman Mike and the fact that he is getting away with murder, but that he better not do it again, at least not in Texas. This scene looks the way it does because there is no other “movie” way to do it, in a sense *Death Proof* takes place in the same world as a De Palma thriller would, and so the long, expository dialogue (told through long tracking shots) is a veritable necessity. The meaning of this scene is pinpointed in its staging, and in its visual allusions.

The idea of *Death Proof* occurring in an alternate universe of “movie-ness,” essentially, also subtracts the criticism about the film's repetitive structure. The audience meets a group of loquacious women, spend some time with them, and then they meet Mike, who kills the women. Then the film repeats, the audience spends time with some loquacious other women, and they too meet Mike. But, of course, what occurs isn't so much a repeat as a remake. Abernathy, Zoe and Kim (the second group of protagonists) hail from the movie business—like Stuntman Mike himself—and are therefore able to defeat him and beat him at his own psychotic game.

The second half of *Death Proof* is thus not a repeat of the first half, but a rewrite, or remake, but with characters capable of beating the film's villain. The old trope about sexually active women dying because of their trespasses is re-written for a girl-power anthem.

Indeed, that is the note of triumph the movie ends on.

There's a theory about the popularity of films which states that people enjoy movies so much because movies can get right what life simply can't. People can experience the happy or just ending in a movie that real life can't provide. Set in the “movie-verse,” *Death Proof* sets up a scenario by which Stuntman Mike can be beat. Generically, this is known as “poetic justice” because people are conditioned to find such justice only in literature or drama, but not in reality. In this case, Mike is conquered by fellow stunt-people, and superior ones at that. In real life, one would never expect him to meet up, by accident no less, with other stunt people on the road. This is a movie conceit, and intentionally so.

If a careful viewer goes down the line, almost every significant character in *Death Proof* is involved in the entertainment industry, whether as a dancer, a DJ, a stunt-person, or on some meta, post-modern level (with directors Tarantino and Eli Roth both appearing in cameos). This fact too is the key to unlocking the film's true nature. *Death Proof* is set not in the real world, but in the fake world of movies and movie tradition. What *Death Proof* accomplishes, then, is the creation of a movie universe where every character is a type audiences know and recognize, where every scene is a scene that's already been played in other films, and every new minute is but a variation on older stories, or even a deliberate rewrite of them.

At one point in the film, Stuntman Mike notes that to get the benefit of the death proof car, you need to be sitting where he sits.

One could extend this metaphor to Tarantino and *Death Proof* itself.

To really get it, and really enjoy it, you need to sit where Tarantino sits: at the head of a wonky film class, essentially. Get inside Tarantino's head—or in his director's chair if you will—and *Death Proof* is an unrivaled cinematic experience, an experience both self-indulgent and brilliant at the same time. It

knows it is a movie, and everything that happens is a reflection of that knowledge.

Grindhouse Presents: Planet Terror * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"*Planet Terror* is not actually interested in frightening its audience ... rather it pursues the uncomfortable sensation an audience might experience when shown potentials in the human body they have never seen before. What matters is the showmanship and the way humor can emphasize the mortification of flesh."—Caetlin Benson-Alliott, *Film Quarterly*, Fall 2008, pages 20–24.

"In *Planet Terror*, we have a film that is not the product of a brilliant director's vision, but of an enthusiastic stylist whose aesthetic sometimes pushes him past the absurdist treatment of his subject and into a kind of frenzied brilliance."—Javier A. Martinez, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, Autumn 2010, pages 331–335.

"*Planet Terror* didn't work as well for this viewer as *Death Proof* did, and that surprises me. In many ways, it is an homage to zombie films and John Carpenter films, even the music, but it just left me wanting to watch other zombie films and John Carpenter films. The cast is uniformly good—it really seemed like Rose McGowan was finally getting her moment to breakout as a star but alas, there were more sinister forces at work in the industry that would present horrors to her deeper than any in this film.

However, kudos to the scratched-up looking film and standing ovation to the missing reel—I remember seeing this in a theater and pockets of us in the place bursting out with laughter and applause when we realized this was intentional, and just as the filmmakers intended, we noticed it didn't matter at all because the section of the story we missed wasn't important anyway. I should probably revisit this film again soon, however—the fact that *Death Proof* was so good may have relegated its co-feature it to an unfair slot on its own."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Rose McGowan (Cherry Darling); Freddy Rodríguez (Wray); Josh Brolin (Dr. William Block); Marley Shelton (Dr. Dakota Block); Jeff Fahey (J.T.); Michael Biehn (Sheriff Hague); Rebel Rodriguez (Tony Block); Bruce Willis (Lt. Muldoon); Naveen Andrews (Abbey); Julio Oscar Mechoso (Romy); Starcy Ferguson (Tammy); Nicky Katt (Joe); Tom Savini (Deputy Tolo); Quentin Tarantino (Rapist); Michael Parks (Earl); Danny Trejo (Machete); Cheech Marin (Priest)

CREW: Dimension Films, Troublemaker Studios, Rodriguez International Pictures and The Weinstein Company present *Planet Terror*. Casting: Mary Vernieu. Production Designer: Steve Joyner. Costume Designer: Nina Proctor. Music: Robert Rodriguez. Director of Photography: Robert Rodriguez. Film Editing: Ethan Maniquis, Robert Rodriguez. Producers: Robert Rodriguez, Elizabeth Avelian, Quentin Tarantino. Executive Producers: Sandra Conditto, Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein. Special Effects: Troublemaker Digital Studios, KNB EFX Group, The Orphanage, Matchframe Video. Written and Directed by: Robert Rodriguez. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A disaster involving a biochemical weapon, "Project Terror," begins to transform the residents of a Texas town into murderous zombies. A stripper, Cherry Darling (McGowan), teams up with her former beau, El Wray (Rodríguez), to lead survivors away from the battle, even though she has lost a leg in the fight. Replacing that leg with a machine gun, Cherry becomes a lethal weapon in the war between the zombies and the military, the latter lead by the mad Muldoon (Willis).

COMMENTARY: There is no doubt that the second film in the *Grindhouse* duo, *Planet Terror*, is more conventionally a "horror film" than the first entry, the bizarre but amazing *Death Proof*. But there is also no doubt that *Planet Terror* is an inferior film in comparison. It is quite clear what the film hopes and attempts to be: a throwback to cheap, pulpy 1970s zombie efforts. It seeks to be as tasteless as any Z-

grade movie of that era, but the overall effect of that desire is lost for several reasons.

The first reason is that the movie involves state of the art special effects that those older films would not have had access to.

Secondly, the film is filled with celebrity cameos, which again, tends to take away the notion of something like a regionally made William Girdler original horror film from the disco decade.

And thirdly, the film applies modern notions of representation and gender roles to the kind of film that would have not, in any way, embodied them.



Dr. Dakota Block (Marley Shelton, left) and Cherry Darling (Rose McGowan) escape the zombie apocalypse in *Planet Terror* (2007).

Here's the real problem, one which is the same as this author touched on for the *Death Proof* review: *Planet Terror* is set in the 2000s with mentions of the Iraq War, use of cell phones, and other modern touches. Yet, the film's visual approach is to feature film scratches, over-saturated colors, and even "gaps" in the film, as if a reel is missing from theatrical distribution at your local theater.

Well, none of these "film effects" are things that would happen in the 2000s. Sure, they would happen in the 1970s. But there's a disconnect between the setting and the technique that makes *Planet Terror* a distancing experience. The distance between visual rhetoric and narrative detail is impossible to traverse.

The same is true for the im-pressive gore effects. *Planet Terror* goes absolutely over the top with blood and guts, and zombie make-up. People swell-up and explode, marred by pustules and bloody tears in their flesh. Again, these visuals are wholly a product of 2000s era techniques, but the "grindhouse" visuals (the missing reel, the soundtrack pops and film scratches) don't match with these effects. No grindhouse film, no cheapjack effort of the 1970s could afford effects on the grand scale featured here. Once more, the effect is a disconnect between the film's desire to be "grindhouse" and its modern narrative.

The film also features big stars like Bruce Willis doing cameos, showing up to the shoot for a day or two. But actors of this quality would not have been available, either, to a grindhouse production. A film like this would not have starred, for example, Robert Redford, Paul Newman or Burt Reynolds. A "name" star in that era would have been John Carradine, or Ray Milland, actors who were past their prime, but still working wherever they could find work. So, the casting here absolutely misses the mark it aims for in some cases, while nailing it (Michael Biehn!) in other cases.



Cherry Darling (Rose McGowan, left) and Dr. Dakota Block (Marley Shelton) hop on a hog in *Planet Terror* (2007).

Planet Terror's desire to be modern also means that it casts a Latino, El Wray, in the lead, heroic role, which would not have happened in the 1970s, either, and then features a lesbian in a non-exploitative way, which is great, but again, not something that really happened at all in "grindhouse era."

It no doubt seems odd for this author to complain about a film accurately representing the time of its production. *Planet Terror* does represent the 2000s, with a female action hero, a Latino protagonist, and with gay characters, but the whole point of the Grindhouse aesthetic was to revive an older type of exploitation film paradigm. In this case, the attempt fails utterly, because the film wants desperately to be retro in one setting (visualizations), and modern in the other (use of big-name stars, state-of-the-art special effects, and diverse cast).

The result is a muddled effort that totally distances the viewer from the film's intent, to revive an older form of horror film. Yes, Rose McGowan is a delight as Cherry Darling, and it is wonderful to add another female to the 2000s action-star pantheon that includes Milla Jovovich and Kate Beckinsale. McGowan plays the comedy and action beautifully and is poetry-in-motion as the one-legged stripper/zombie fighter. McGowan's appearance—scantily clad, missing a leg, wearing a deadly prosthetic—makes the character an unforgettable icon and image of *Planet Terror's* decade. No one can deny that. It's just a shame that the film didn't pick an approach and stick to it.

If one can give Tarantino the benefit of the doubt regarding the creation of a "grindhouse" alternate universe, why not extend the same courtesy to Rodriguez? The answer comes down to how much control and artistry a director seems to control over his work of art, perhaps. Tarantino's obsessions and quirks manage to transmit (loudly) in *Death Proof*, from the ambivalence about women's roles (victims to ogle, or girl power icons?) to his foot fetish. His films all seem to take place in an alternate universe where the artist is, practically speaking, God. *Planet Terror* feels much more scattershot and diffuse in vision and execution.

Because here's the dirty little secret about exploitation films of the 1970s that *Planet Terror* doesn't get.

Most of them were sincere, even in their badness.

Filmmakers like the aforementioned Girdler, Charles Pierce or George Romero took limited resources and limited technology and did their darn best to create authentically scary films. They didn't put technique over narrative. They had to overcome bad sound, grainy film, poor acting, and rubber special effects to create something that had value and power.

Project Terror tries to "fake" the badness and puts that visual approach above storytelling and authenticity. It therefore actually misses what was so great and compelling about those 1970s filmmakers and their movies. It understands the surface of those grindhouse films, but none of their real values. Films like *The Manitou* (1978) or *The Town that Dreaded Sundown* (1976), or *The Crazies* (1973), didn't take on pop culture resonance and endure beyond the seventies because of their retro visual affections. They did so because they tried to do a lot with very little, and viewers could sense, behind the lack of resources, an intrepid spirit, and an active intelligence.

For all its visual razzle-dazzle, and even its unforgettable female lead, *Planet Terror* is an empty exercise in style over substance, and in a very real way, it dishonors the experience it wishes so much to resurrect and bring to mass attention.

With its focus on car stunts and obsession on overlong dialogue sequences, *Death Proof* feels more like the quirky work of an individual artist making weird, idiosyncratic and individual films in the 1970s than the empty-headed, over-the-top gore show of *Planet Terror* can ever manage.

Hannibal Rising * * *

Critical Reception

"With its 1940s setting, lavish backdrops and tasteful gore, Hannibal Lecter's ... origin story resembles nothing so much as an edition of Masterpiece Theater directed by Rob Zombie."—Amy Longsdorf, *The*

"A feast of self-referential thrills, chills, and winking comedy, *Hannibal Rising* comes as a pleasant surprise after a string of so-so Lecter Movies..."—Katherine Monk, *National Post*, February 16, 2007.

"How do you blackmail an author? You threaten to let somebody else write your book, with their ideas, based on a rough outline you established in another book. Lest you think things like this don't happen in the real world, even to successful authors, for the formula above, Thomas Harris and Dino De Laurentiis are the values you plug in to get to get a moderately interesting, yet completely uninspired novel, and then a film version of the same.

Before anyone says you can't make Hannibal Lecter work without Anthony Hopkins, go watch the television series *Hannibal* and that will soon sort you out. Besides, Gaspard Ulliel didn't do a bad job as young Hannibal at all—but that's about all that can really be said in praise of this film. It's a standard revenge story with a known commodity getting the revenge, in this case, Hannibal Lecter, doling out punishment for the fiends who introduced Hannibal to his peculiar dietary preferences via his younger sister.

It's interesting to note that in *Red Dragon* and *Silence of the Lambs* Lecter is really presented to us as a side character, a Faustian advisor. As soon as Hannibal steps to center stage, it becomes a more difficult narrative (which Harris handled well in his novel *Hannibal*), but even the TV series knows that a little Hannibal goes a long way. Hannibal works best as a seasoning to someone else's stew (sorry, couldn't resist).

I can't help but pity Thomas Harris. He was trying to protect his baby, lest others effectively emulate the fate of Hannibal's sister, and perhaps he had the last laugh, for with the cunning of a talented novelist, he found a way to deliver what Dino De Laurentiis demanded but with its own clever spin—a meal so bland that no one asked for seconds."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Gaspard Ulliel (Hannibal Lecter); Aaron Thomas (Young Hannibal); Gong Li (Lady Murasaki); Helena Lia-Tachovska (Mischa Lecter); Richard Lef (Father Lecter); Dominic West (Inspector Popil); Rhys Ifans (Vladis Grutas); Michelle Wade (Nanny); Richard Brake (Enrikas Dortlich); Martin Hub (Lothar); Ingeborga Dapkunaite (Mother Lecter). Kevin McKidd (Petras Kolnas); Stephen Walters (Sigmas Milko).

CREW: MGM, Young Hannibal Production, The Dino De Laurentiis Company, Ingenious Film Partners, Quinta Communications, Zephyr Films, ETIC Films and Carthago Films present *Hannibal Rising*. Casting: Nancy Bishop, Leo Davis. Costume Designer: Anna B. Sheppard. Production Designer: Allan Starski. Music Ilan Eshkeri, Shigeru Umeyayashi. Director of Photography: Ben Davis. Film Editing: Valerio Bonelli, Pietro Scalia. Producers: Tarak Ben Ammar, Dino De Laurentiis, Martha De Laurentiis. Executive Producers: James Clayton, Duncan Reid. Based on the novel by: Thomas Harris. Written by: Thomas Harris. Directed by: Peter Webber. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 121 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Nazi-occupied Lithuania, the Lecter family hides out in a cabin in the snowy woods until the war finds them. The only survivors of a tank battle are young Hannibal Lecter and his beloved sister, Mischa (Tachovska). Soon, however, new troops occupy the Lecter cabin, and an event occurs there that changes Hannibal's life forever. Years later, a young adult Hannibal (Ulliel) lives with his aunt, Lady Murasaki (Li) and develops affection for her. The past, however, haunts him, including the behavior of a soldier responsible for Mischa's death, Grutas (Ifans). The brilliant Lecter, a medical student, soon plots his revenge, unaware of how the blowback from that revenge may impact his own surviving family.

COMMENTARY: The first decade of the 2000s looked forward in many ways, but there was certainly one popular trend that was all about looking back. This was the decade for prequels, both in and out of the horror genre.

Outside horror, *Star Wars* had returned in 1999, and would continue through 2005 telling the story of Anakin Skywalker, the man who would eventually become Darth Vader. On TV, series such as *Enterprise* (2001–2005) and *Smallville* (2001–2011) told of the early years of Starfleet, and Superman, respectively. In the horror genre, various film revealed to audiences the back stories of Father Lankester Merrin (*The Exorcist: The Beginning*), Michael Myers (Rob Zombie's *Halloween*), and even Hannibal

Lecter (*Hannibal Rising*). This trend continued into the early 2010s with prequels for *The Thing* (2011) and *Alien* (*Prometheus* [2012]) hitting theaters.

A common complaint from fans about prequels, in and out of horror, is that they are largely unnecessary.

Does anyone really need to know the entire backstory of Darth Vader, including his childhood as a slave on Tatooine piloting pod racers and yelling “yippee?”



Just as *Hannibal Rising* reveals the origin story of Hannibal Lecter, the *Halloween* remake showcases Michael Myers' (Tyler Mane) rise.

Can any background story or historical biography explain why Michael Myers kills, or why Hannibal the Cannibal eats his victims?

In critical circles the word “unnecessary” is often applied to such prequels (including by this author).

But of course, what film, prequel or otherwise, is strictly “necessary?”

In horror, prequels are perhaps even trickier. A key concept of horror is the idea that those things that are unfamiliar are scary. The more familiar we grow with something, or someone, the less power that idea or character possesses the potential to scare the audience. Michael Myers is terrifying precisely because the audience does not understand his motives. That white mask is a reflection of audience fears, not a reflection of his personality or a discrete biographical history. Additionally, Freddy Krueger grows less terrifying in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* sequels precisely because audiences are familiar with him and his bag of tricks. The reason most prequels are made is to reveal a back story, but a back story works against horror, and terror.

In the case of Hannibal Lecter, however, there are some points to consider.

First, the film’s screenplay is written by the creator of the character, Hannibal, Thomas Harris, and his participation means that this film is no mere knock-off or cash-grab. Rather it is a story steeped in history and personal pathos.

Secondly, this prequel, while indeed exploring Hannibal’s formative years and choices, is, at the very least, not a rote “catch a serial killer story,” like the previous entry in the franchise, *Red Dragon* (2002). That film was very much imitative of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), with an investigator going to Hannibal to get help catching another serial killer. But the mainstream approach made the effort feel bland, as well as repetitive.

As the fourth film in the “official” saga, *Hannibal Rising* is, at the very least, a new direction. In a strange way, the film also frees the franchise from the ravages of aging. Anthony Hopkins is a great Hannibal. He is a remarkable actor. But no one is immortal. This film opens the doorway for a different actor to play the role. This is important. Nobody batted an eye when Mads Mikkelsen took the role in the TV series that followed this film, in part because there was already a precedent for different actors portraying Lecter.

A period piece with a serious, slow-moving nature, *Hannibal Rising* is perhaps more historical biography than a horror film. The stay awake trope is utilized, and there is some gore, but the focus is on character and action here, more than suspense. Given the aging of the franchise, it’s a valid option to keep the whole thing going. Ulliel is terrific as a young Hannibal, playing a man who is an odd bird indeed, tortured by guilt, but also by his directionless rage and anger.

Again, any prequel must grapple with the question: do we really need to know this? Do we really need to know that Darth Vader had to abandon his mother as a boy? Do we really need to know that Michael Myers lived in an abusive household of white-trash reprobates? Do we really need to know that Hannibal ate his sister, and that he kills everyone who knows about his shame?

The 2000s are an intriguing time, because there was a taste for revisiting pop culture characters of great fame, but there was no clarity about how to do it. A traditional follow-up or sequel? A re-imagining or remake starting at the beginning? A prequel, delving into the past? Or how about a clash of two beloved pop culture icons (*Freddy vs. Jason* or *AVP*)? What was clear was that audiences were not done yet with Michael Myers, Darth Vader, Superman, the xenomorph, or Hannibal Lecter.

But what was unclear was the way forward.

Another reason fans don’t always appreciate prequels is that prequels fill in details that fans have already filled in for themselves with their fan theories. An official prequel kills whole universes of fan speculation and fan fiction. Also, they don’t account for the fact that life is a messy thing. There is no one thing that could make Anakin Skywalker become Darth Vader. There is no one turning point where Hannibal goes cannibal. Prequels often feel uncomfortably tidy, because they seem obliged to put pieces together and connect dots. Again, that inclination runs against successful horror. It’s better, often, not to have those dots connected. Familiarity breeds contempt, not good scares.

Hannibal Rising is likely one of those “your mileage may vary” movies. It is well-made, and well-

acted, and it tells an intriguing story. It's not like the other Hannibal films at all, yet is a worthy addition to the canon if the viewer's desire is to know the character's history.

If one could care less about that, then a Young Hannibal story probably isn't going to satisfy a viewer's desire. Most fans want to see Hannibal at his apex, a predator in the wild, a silver screen monster of cunning and brutality (but also, strangely, morality). A prequel doesn't really satisfy the horror fan's hope to see this boogeyman back in action. Indeed, after this film, Hannibal is no longer a boogeyman, but a human with clay feet, and someone to sympathize with.

Is that good or bad? Humanizing a character in a film is usually a good thing. But it also can ruin the scares.

Hatchet * 1/2

Critical Reception

"The movie is never as cheeky or as fun as Green thinks it is, but he tries with all his might. Still, every boogeyman and slasher cliché this movie borrows was better somewhere else. Although it probably wasn't grosser."—Wesley Morris, *Boston Globe*: "There's no reason not to bury this gory *Hatchet*," October 1, 2010.

"High expectations and any discerning taste should be thrown out the window for a film of *Hatchet's* budget. That accomplished, audiences will find a gem of an intentionally bad movie."—Scott Schueller, *Chicago Tribune*: "*Hatchet* carves a place in horror fan's hearts," September 7, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Joel David Moore (Ben); Tamara Feldman (Marybeth Dunstan); Deon Richmond (Marcus); Kane Hodder (Victor Crowley); Mercedes McNab (Misty); Parry Shen (Shawn); Joel Murray (Doug Shapiro); Joleigh Fioreavanti (Jenna); Richard Riehle (Jim Permatteo); Patrika Darbo (Shannon Permatteo); Robert Englund (Sampson); Joshua Leonard (Ainsley); Tony Todd (The Reverend Zombie); John Carl Buechler (Jack Cracker); Rileah Vanderbilt (Young Victor Crowley).

CREW: Anchor Bay Entertainment, ArieScope Pictures, High Seas Entertainment in association with Radioaktive Film presents *Hatchet*. Casting: Shannon Makharian. Production Designer: Bryan McBrien. Costume Designer: Heather Sladinski. Special Effects: Magical Media Industries. Music: Andy Garfield. Director of Photography: Will Barratt. Film Editors: Christopher Roth. Producers: Scott Altomare, Sarah Elbert, Cory Neal. Executive Producers: Roman Kindrachuk, Andrew Mysko. Written and Directed by: Adam Green. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of college kids attend Mardi Gras in New Orleans. One student, Ben, is depressed over a break-up with his girlfriend of eight years, and his friend, Marcus, indulges Ben when he says he wants to go on a night-time tour of a local swamp. Also taking part on the bayou tour are two young women making a "girls gone wild"-style video with a sleazy producer named David Shapiro (Murray), an older "tourist" couple, and the beautiful but mysterious Marybeth (Feldon). The tour guide is a charlatan named Shawn, and early into the swamp odyssey, he runs the tour boat aground on a rock. This is bad, because the tourists have come ashore near the secluded home of a local legend named Victor Crowley (Hodder) a monstrously deformed man who kills people with a hatchet, but who might also be a malevolent ghost. Marybeth is aware of the entire Victor Crowley "tall tale" because she believes he is responsible for the disappearance of her father (Englund) and brother (Leonard) the night before the tour.

COMMENTARY: *Hatchet's* amusing tag line is: "*It's not a remake, it's not a sequel, and it's not based on a*

Japanese one.”

The movie promises—succinctly—just one thing: “*Old school American horror.*”

This method of advertisement is a time-capsule showcasing, perhaps, how “old school” horror fans were feeling about the direction of the genre in the mid-2000s. Alas, the tag line quoted above is also approximately a million-and-one times more inventive than any dialogue, situation or visual featured during this low budget effort’s scanty running time.

The idea is that *Hatchet* should be viewed as a paean to eighties horror, and the slasher paradigm, in particular of the Reagan Era. Accordingly, all the clichés of eighties films are present and accounted for in *Hatchet*. There’s the “*breast part of the movie*” cliché, wherein beautiful young women dis-robe for the camera. There’s the Crazy Old Local—the Cassandra Figure—who warns that “*You’re all going to die*” (but whose warning is ignored). There’s the flashback “*crime in the past*” that describes the transgression against Victor Crowley that turned him into a murderer. There’s even the gory *coup de grace*: here, a decapitation. And of course, there’s the *sting-in-the-tail/tale* wherein the killer returns from the dead for one last strike.

It is fun to see all these genre conventions put back into play for 2007, but *Hatchet* is such an artless, clueless effort that the regurgitation of old tropes doesn’t feel like enough to sustain the movie. For all their various and sundry deficits, the *Scream* films at least turned these familiar slasher conventions on their head, surprising the audience with when/how/why they were deployed. *Hatchet* is merely content to stage these chestnuts as you’ve seen them before, as if their inclusion is a *priori* humorous.

Nudge, nudge.

Breast, breast.

As far as being a “comedy” horror film, as some have suggested, this is a far cry from such classic eighties efforts as *Evil Dead 2* (1987), *Fright Night* (1985) or *Return of the Living Dead* (1985). It’s much more in the league of low-rent, Troma fare, or *Return of the Living Dead Part II* (1987). The scenes that are supposed to be funny are actually shrill. The humor is about on par with *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001), except it’s more aptly *Not Another Dead Teen Movie*.

Unfortunately, the horror aspect of the film is as terrible as the comedy: there’s not a single successful scare in the whole film, and even the make-up on Crowley is lousy. He’s not a menacing villain in the slightest, and the attack scenes are staged clumsily: he just runs into frame, hacks away, and keeps hacking. The blocking, scene compositions, even the choice of shots (almost always medium shots) reveal what a sub-par effort this is. Here’s an example: In John Carpenter’s original *Halloween* (1978), Haddonfield itself became a kind of character in the play. The early parts of the film showcased the terrain where Michael would strike, and viewers were treated to long, evocative shots of the tree-lined suburban streets. There was a sense of place. Of geography. Of location. By contrast, In *Hatchet*, all the horror action takes place in a bayou—an absolutely great location for a horror movie (see: *Southern Comfort* [1981]), yet Green utilizes eye-level medium shots so often—with the actors filling the frame in packs—that the audience gets no sense of the terrain or location. There’s not a single long shot of the group making their way through the bayou, and so *Hatchet* not only lacks a sense of place, but a sense of scope. There’s nothing cinematic in the visuals. Again, the material he’s mocking, say a *Halloween II* or a *Friday the 13th Part II*—for all the clichés in evidence—made exquisite use of the frame, of wide-screen. These films looked good.

Hatchet doesn’t.

The film is sloppy in so many ways. In one early scene, the audience sees the tour boat moving across the swamp. The film cuts back to Ben and Marcus sharing a private discussion on the rear of the craft, and it’s clear as they talk that the boat is *not* moving. When the film cuts back to the wider shot, the boat is still moving.

Again, all this stuff is quite forgivable in a low-budget production if the acting is good; if the script is smart; or if it’s funny or scary. But here the script is dreadful, and the performances are generally amateurish. The director apparently encouraged his actors to go way over the top, and Tony Todd and Robert Englund fare especially poorly under his misdirection, hamming up their cameos to a cringe-

worthy degree. Of all the performers, only Mercedes McNab emerges unscathed. The things that work in the film do so because of her good performance.

This author was actually looking forward to what *Hatchet* promised: a scary, funny, unpretentious good time at the movies; one that didn't take itself, its premise, or the horror genre too seriously. But *Hatchet* is a poorly written, poorly shot, tour of genre clichés you've seen a million times. Unfortunately, *Hatchet* is a hack job.

The Hills Have Eyes 2 * * ½

Critical Reception

"It is only another by-the-numbers, don't-mess-with-the-formula screen filler aimed at the gore-hound fan boys who sustain all these franchises while bemoaning their sameness."—Terry Lawson, *Tribune News Service*, March 26, 2007.

"Characters' emotional arcs are all too brief, submerged beneath all those entrails, and as usual the protagonists demonstrate stupidity in the face of danger, ultimately providing the special-effects teams with a chance to add stomach-churning splatters and squelches."—*Western Daily Press*, July 27, 2007, page 64.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Michael McMillian (Napoleon); Jessica Stroup (Barbie); Jacob Vargas (Crank); Flex Alexander (Sarge); Lee Thompson Young (Delmar); Daniella Alonso (Missy); Eric Edelstein (Spitter); Reshad Strick (Mickey); Ben Crowley (Stump); Michael Bailey Smith (Papa Hades); Dererk Mears (Chameleon); David Reynolds (Hansel); Jeff Kober (Colonel Redding); Jay Avacone (Dr. Wilson); Philip Pavel (Paul Foster); Archia Kao (Han); Tyrell Kemlo (Stabber); Jason Oettle (Letch).

CREW: Fox Atomic presents a Craven/Maddalena Films and Peter Lock Production, *The Hills Have Eyes 2*. Casting: Mark Bennett. Costume Designer: Janie Bryant. Production Designer: Keith Wilson. Special Make-up Effects: Gregory Nicotero, Howard Berger. Music: Trevor Morris. Director of Photography: Sam MacCurdy. Film Editors: Kirk Morri, Sue Blainey. Producers: Wes Craven, Marianne Maddalena, Peter Locke. Executive Producer: Jonathan Debin. Based on characters created by Wes Craven. Written by: Wes and Jonathan Craven. Directed by: Martin Weisz. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: American National Guardsmen and women are sent into the desert, Sector 16, to install surveillance equipment there, where, two years earlier, the Carter family was violently attacked by savage mutants. The soldiers find the outpost abandoned, and soon run afoul of the mutants. The mutants are led by Papa Hades (Bailey Smith), who is intent on capturing healthy women and using them as breeding stock to increase the tribe's numbers.

COMMENTARY: Fast-paced and legitimately grotesque, *The Hills Have Eyes 2* clearly serves as a commentary on the Iraq War. Here, the U.S. Army and its soldiers are outsmarted and outmaneuvered at every turn by an apparently "primitive" enemy with a territorial advantage. The American soldiers, a diverse group representing American demographics well, must contend with an insurgency in a desert that consists of not much more than "*rocks and rattlesnakes*." They have little or no support from home and must go it alone in a dangerous situation. The film features obvious references to the Iraq War and President Bush (whom the screenplay observes "*lies too much*") and some scenes of harrowing, suspenseful violence too. At one point, a soldier even repeats a classic Bushism—"*bring 'em on, man!*"—and the point about reckless, cowboy foreign policy is hammered home.

Despite such touches, this sequel still feels like something of a quickie cash-grab. If the remake of

the 1977 material did much to focus on the division between red states and blue states in the 2000s, the sequel doesn't tend to tread as deeply into the "culture clash"/ "civilization vs. savagery" theme that has been the bread and butter of the franchise since the disco decade. Basically, the sequel seems satisfied to recreate Iraq on American soil. It wants to be patted on the back for its cleverness, but it doesn't have much observation to make, except that sending soldiers into a dangerous situation, on difficult terrain, is a bad idea.

Also, and this is a matter of personal taste, some of the material in the film of the mutant, Papa Hades, raping a female American soldier, Missy, feels unnecessary and poorly considered. When the film was released, there were American soldiers still serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, and while the story of how the mutants breed provides some background about them, the action nonetheless feels exploitative. Of course, rape has long been part of the horror tapestry (See: *Irreversible*), but often the horror genre utilizes rape to raise social problems. Even the much-derided *I Spit on Your Grave*, while featuring a terrible rape, showcased how the victim rebuilt her life by re-assembling the pages of her novel; rebuilding her work and art after the crime, one puzzle piece at a time. And then of course, she killed the fuckers who raped her, but the meaningful and pro-social part was the character's internal rebuilding. *The Hills Have Eyes 2* doesn't really possess any pro-social reasons for featuring an extended rape scene, and Missy is a sympathetic character who deserves a better fate, and more sensitive handling.

Maybe I'm just getting old. The horror genre is indeed supposed to transgress, to push comfortable boundaries, but coupled with that crucial pushing of the envelope should be a good and artistic reason; a purpose. *The Hills Have Eyes 2* is harrowing and violent and makes a direct comparison to the Iraq War, but the rape scene doesn't add anything but a pinch of nastiness to the proceedings. The rape scene in *Last House on the Left*, also from the mind of Wes Craven, is another good example of a rape scene that is utilized for a reason. But here, the rape scene feels like a bridge too far. It is shocking to be certain, but for no specific purpose.

The Hills Have Eyes 2 possesses other deficits. The mutants this time around are non-descript and lacking individuality, and their make-up looks rubbery and fake. Some of the soldier banter also feels clichéd and off-the-shelf.

By point of contrast, the film features some unexpectedly efficient jump scares and some scenes of terror that will linger in the imagination. In the 1980s, Wes Craven's own *The Hills Have Eyes 2* was something of a disaster, an unfinished, quasi-slasher sequel to a masterpiece. This sequel, while not as terrific, better captures the mood, pace, and world of its immediate predecessor than the 1980s sequel did. But that is light praise for a film bearing Craven's imprint as writer.

The Hitcher ★ ★

Critical Reception

"This *Hitcher* is all thumbs."—Jim Ridley, *The Village Voice*, January 24, 2007.

"There might have been more tension if the cynicism of the viewer weren't so completely taken for granted: there's no glee to Ryder's assault on wholesome American values, and no sense of violation when a bunny gets run down or blood is splattered over a child's picture book..."—Jake Wilson, *The Age*, March 16, 2007, page 7.

"Filmmaker Dave Meyers remake not only dispenses with the earlier film's intriguing psychological subtext but doesn't even get the surface thriller elements right."—F. Switek, *The Video Librarian*, May 1, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Sean Bean (John Ryder); Sophia Bush (Grace Andrews); Zachary Knighton (Jim Halsey); Neal

McDonough (Lt. Esteridge); Kyle Davis (Clerk); Skip O'Brien (Sheriff Bremmer); Travis Schuldt (Deputy Bremmer); Danny Bolero (Officer Edwards); Jeffrey Hutchinson (Young Father); Yara Martinez (Beth); Lauren Cohn (Marlene); Kurt Grossi (Franklin).

CREW: Focus Features, Intrepid Pictures and Platinum Dunes present *The Hitcher*. Casting: Lisa Fields. Production Designer: David Lazan. Costume Designer: Leann Radeka. Music: Steve Jablonsky. Director of Photography: James Hawkinson. Film Editor: Jim May. Producers: Michael Bay, Andrew Form, Brad Fuller, Alfred Haber, Charles R. Meeker. Based on the screenplay of the 1986 film by: Eric Red. Written by: L Eric Red, Jake Wade Wall, Eric Bernt. Directed by: Dave Meyers. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Digital Domain. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two college students, Jim (Knighton) and Grace (Bush), on spring break pick up a hitchhiker, John Ryder (Bean), who turns out to be a psychotic killer. He develops an unhealthy obsession with them, and after they manage to escape him, he relentlessly stalks them. Even once the police are brought in, Ryder won't stop pursuing the couple, because, he claims, he wants someone to "stop him."

COMMENTARY: The Platinum Dunes remake machine is at it again, and *The Hitcher* is not one of its better efforts. In fact, *The Hitcher* proves that a concept alone doesn't make a film succeed. Rather, a successful horror film is some magical combination of casting, writing, direction inspiration, and, yes, alchemy. The 1986 original film, featuring Rutger Hauer and C. Thomas Howell, succeeded not merely because of its setting and narrative, but because of the moments played between the lines, one might conclude. That film featured a subtext of attraction, actually, between its combatants, that made it something more than your average "road trip gone wrong" story.

Naturally, since this is a 2000s remake, the entirety of the subtext is removed in the remake, and the movie is, pardon the pun, played straight. The remake's idea of invention is to make a new character, Grace, the key protagonist, and Halsey is the one who gets pulled apart by two trucks. That shift from male to female protagonist is not enough invention, however, to hang the remake upon.

Sean Bean, a superb actor, plays a much more conventional and predictable madman here, and his incarnation of John Ryder exists in more of a "thriller" world than a "horror" world, if that makes sense. Hauer's Ryder was twitchy and weird, and utterly singular in his quirks and attempts to terrify. He seemed larger than life. Bean's Ryder feels small and basic by comparison, a garden variety movie madman. In the original film, Jim, along with the audience, felt more isolated on the road, and there was a deeper sense of the highway as a galvanizing setting. It was the right and natural place that a monster like Ryder would inhabit. It was his natural habitat. Here, the road setting is not plucked for the same terror and feels more like an ingredient in the story than an element of the film's atmosphere.

Again, it is nice that the film now features a final girl instead of final guy, but the remake of *The Hitcher* doesn't give the relationship between Grace and Ryder any interesting touches. Grace's journey is one of self-actualization, perhaps, as she goes berserk, and takes the law into her own hands to give Ryder what he wants ... stopping him. But where the original built a homo-erotic relationship between Jim and Ryder, the remake can't be bothered to link the two characters in any way that adds layers to the narrative.

Not to sound like a broken record, but this is indeed the problem with many of the horror remakes of the 2000s. These films adopt a brand name franchise or film, like *It's Alive* or *The Hitcher*, and then feel that the act of appropriation is enough. The original films tend to be deeper and more thought-provoking, the remakes more linear and superficial.

Given the choice between a deep film with subtext, and a shallow film without it, which would you choose?

The Hitcher remake is flat and empty and barren of any real meaning. It's just a thriller set on the road, with a conventional madman and, frankly, a conventional final girl. The acting in the remake is serviceable, but no more, and even the highway stunts seem to lack true impact. As for the scene

involving a character being ripped apart between two trucks, it (along with the finger in the French fries) is probably the most remembered, or signature moment from the original. But in the remake, it's not done any better than it was twenty years earlier.

The Hitcher is a crushing disappointment, so don't give this movie a ride, if you find it thumbing on your streaming service. Drive out of your way to pick up the original instead.

The Host ★ ★ ★ ★

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kang-ho Song (Park Gang-Doo); Byun Hee-bong (Park Hie-bong); Hae-il Park (Pak Nam-il); Baek Doo-na (Park Nam-Joo); Ko A-sung (Park Hyun-seo); Jae-eung Lee (Se-jin); Dong-ho Lee (Se-joo); David Anselmo (Donald); Martin Lord Cayce (U.S. Senator); Paul Lazar (Doctor).

CREW: Showbox Entertainment and Chunggeorahm Film present in association with Boston Investments and CJ Venture Investment, *The Host*. Casting: John Jackson. Production Design by: Seong-hie Ryu. Costume Designer: Sang-Gyeong Jo. Special Effects: Julie Anderson, John Cox's Creature Workshop. Music: Byong-woo Lee. Director of Photography: Hyung-ku Ki. Film Editing: Sun-min Kim. Producer: Yog-ba Choi, Neung-yeon Joh. Executive Producers: Tae-sung Jeong, Woo-Taek Kim, Miky Lee. Written by: Bong Joon Ho, Won-jun Ha, Chul-hyun Baek. Directed by: Bong Joon Ho. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 120 minutes

SYNOPSIS: At a U.S. Army Base in the Han River area of South Korea, an American military officer orders a Korean underling to dispose of hundreds of bottles of toxic formaldehyde directly into the river. Years later, in 2006, the hapless Gang-Du (Kag-bo Song) runs a small food stand with Grandpa and his dad and takes care of his little daughter, Hyun-Seo. On one normal sunny day, Gang-Du is delivering food to some customers camping out by the nearby shore, when he notices they are all looking at something "dark" in the water. A terrifying monster emerges from the River and goes on a vicious, sustained attack. It eventually disappears with Hyun Seo in its tentacled grasp. After the horrible monster attack at the Han River, the American government gets involved, convinced that those close to the beast have contracted a deadly virus, like SARS, and that they must be quarantined. Gang-Du and his family are sent to the hospital, but then he receives a garbled phone call, one that makes him realize his daughter is still alive in the lair of the monster.

COMMENTARY: The Korean horror film *The Host* (2006) from director Joon Ho-Bong is one of the scariest and most entertaining big monster films of the 2000s. In fact, it may actually be the most droll, effective and overall fun "*monster on the loose*" movie since the original *Tremors* (1990) came down the pipe.

To start, *The Host* adopts a familiar paradigm: the idea that a "bad" or immoral authority (here the U.S. Government) precipitates the creation of a murderous creature. It was atomic testing by the American military that created Godzilla, for example, in the 1954 Japanese film. And, in the great era of the 1970s, hormone experimentation created giant, feral bunnies in *Night of the Lepus* (1972), even as crop dusting chemicals caused spiders to attack William Shatner in *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977). And, of course, environmental pollution by the American citizenry angered an army of frogs in the Ray Milland-starrer, *Frogs* (1972).

The "bad act" by an authority figure gets revived in *The Host* and sets the tone of the entire film, one which doesn't gaze kindly on contemporary American leaders and their foreign policy decisions. One need only look at American actions in the 2000s to see why other countries might be rankled. The U.S. invaded Iraq, which wasn't responsible for 9/11, without a true international coalition (just a spotty

“coalition of the willing”) and even after Saddam Hussein agreed to allow U.N. inspectors back into the country. In the same era, and under the same president, the U.S. pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia, causing fears of nuclear proliferation around the globe. The same year, President George W. Bush refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol, which would have taken on the worst impacts of global climate change.

To people around the world, it didn't look like America had the world's interests at heart anymore, only its own.

Like the original *Godzilla*, this film features a social statement about how far America has again fallen from the graces of the international community. Remember the Oxygen Destroyer Doomsday weapon in *Godzilla*? Here, the Americans attempt to deploy a similarly destructive countermeasure against the monster they created, in this case a toxin called “Agent Yellow.” Thus, the end of the film depicts the release of this chemical agent, and many characters end up bleeding out of their ears from exposure.

Given all this, it's virtually impossible not to read what occurs in *The Host* as a very specific and pointed comment on the never-ending Iraq War. The Americans in the film create the problem (polluting the river), much as we sided with Saddam Hussein and sold him American helicopters and chemical weapons during his war with Iran in the 1980s. Then, once the monster is created in the film, America becomes convinced it has infected the community, and goes on a rampage to discover the source of the virus. Without going into further detail, just let me state that the “monster virus” hunt is about the same as WMD hunts in Iraq. Then, finally, America swoops in to stop the monster, as we invaded Iraq to stop our former ally, Hussein, and deploys Agent Yellow thus causing a new round of terror.

In terms of other monster movie parallels, the closest monster one may be *Q: The Winged Serpent* (1982), which told the story of a small-time con-man, played by Michael Moriarty, who found the nest of a giant lizard atop the Chrysler Building, and then attempted to exploit that discovery with the police. Now, *The Host* doesn't involve a conman, but it utilizes the monster in much the same fashion: to illuminate a human character; to reveal the inner core of a man. Only in *The Host*, it's not just Gang-Du that is illuminated, it's his whole crazy family: a bickering, hysterical, loving, very funny bunch. One would be hard-pressed to think of one other monster movie in which a funeral memorial turns into a grieving free-for-all, with family members kicking and hitting each other, all while screaming hysterically. But that happens here. *The Host* moves easily from one tone to another, sometimes scary, sometimes grievously sad, sometimes incredibly funny.

In that way, it mirrors our real lives. And that's the reason why the monster and other characters too, sometimes stumble and fall down in the act of what they're doing. For instance, there's a very funny scene in which a Korean official wearing a bio-hazard suit, struts into a quarantine zone, and slips and lands on his ass. He then stands up and demands, of the surrounded crowd, “Attention!” Like he didn't have the attention of everyone already with his pratfall. This is not only an attempt to puncture bureaucracy, it's a nod to real life. People fall and get up and carry on. So do monsters.

Of course, monster movies always run the risk of being unrealistic, yet by setting his monster flick on sunny days, and by having characters say and do sometimes funny, silly things, director Joon Ho-Bing actually makes the scenario that much more realistic. We can recognize the Park family (Gang-Du's family) as one like our own, and we root for them to rescue Hyun-Seo. And boy do they give it their all. And be warned ... not everyone survives. Thus, the comical family bickering gives way to family tragedy at points, and there's one monster-hunting scene by a sewer that will break your heart. Gang-Du makes a terrible, terrible mistake, and it costs him dearly when the monster goes after someone he loves. In that horrifying moment, *The Host* reaches the full potential of the sub-genre, the monster movie. For instance, there's a wonderfully authentic and human scene wherein Grandpa, Gang-Du and his siblings are sharing a dinner. Gang-Du has—as his wont—dozed off, and Grandpa takes that opportunity to tell the siblings the reasons why they should not be cruel to his boy. The scene explains why, in fact, his failings exist and why they should tolerate him. It's a beautifully played sequence that reveals the unconditional love of a parent and explains why Grandpa feels so close to this particular man. The scene

is honest at the same time it's funny, but that could be said of much that goes on in *The Host*.

There are some really great moments in *The Host*. One of my favorite images involves the monster disgorging torrents of bones from its maw after digesting some victims. It's a really gross regurgitation ... and one that seems to never end. The manner in which the (sometimes clumsy) monster navigates bridges is also fascinating. It flips, tail-to-head, head-to-tail, while traversing their under-structures. I also appreciated the film's two exquisite jump scares, and—of course—the scene wherein Gang-Du attempts to convince the Americans he doesn't have the virus, but everything he says only confirms to the Americans that he's infected.

The Host is a particularly human monster movie, and if the film's final scene, set back in that tiny food stand, doesn't make you a little misty and make you think of your own family, then you actually might be the one who's a monster.

Hostel 2 * * ½

Critical Reception

"But unlike a smart horror movie, there's absolutely no context to the violence, no purpose to the horror and no consequence for this evil hatred of human flesh."—Vince Horiuchi, *The Salt Lake Tribune*: "*Hostel 2* is shocking ... shockingly bad," June 8, 2007.

"What is illustrated here is a world full of victims—torture victims, economic victims and emotional victims—in which the Almighty Dollar is the key to salvation."—Sorcha Fhlainn, *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, November 8, 2007, pages 105–106.

"...easier to follow, and much more interesting than the original."—Ron Hogan, *Den of Geek*, June 29, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Lauren German (Beth); Roger Bart (Stuart); Heather Matarazzo (Lorna); Bijou Phillips (Whitney); Richard Burgi (Todd); Vera Jordanova (Axelle); Jay Hernandez (Paxton); Jordan Ladd (Stephanie); Milan Knazko (Sasha); Edwige Fenech (Professor); Stanislav Yanevski (Miroslav); Monika Malacova (Mrs. Bathory); Ivan Furdik (Guard); Davide Dominici (Riccardo); Petr Vancura (Pavel).

CREW: Sony Pictures Entertainment, Lionsgate, Screen Gems, Next Entertainment, Raw Nerve, International Production Company presents *Hostel 2*. Casting: Kelly Martin Wagner. Production Designer: Robb Wilson King. Costume Designer: Susanna Puisto. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Barbed Wire FX, Beach VFX, Luma Pictures. Music: Nathan Barr. Director of Photography: Milan Chadima. Film Editor: George Folesey, Jr. Producers: Chris Briggs, Mike Fleiss. Executive Producers: Leifur B. Dagfinnsson, Scott Spiegel, Quentin Tarantino, Boaz Yakin. Written and Directed by: Eli Roth. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The last survivor of the Elite Hunting victim pool, Paxton (Hernandez), returns home to the States, and is brutally murdered. Sometime later, three art students in Rome, Beth (German), Whitney (Phillips) and Lorna (Matarazzo)—are lured to the hostel in Slovakia by the beautiful model, Axelle (Jordanova). She raves about the country's therapeutic hot springs. On the train ride to Slovakia, the trio of young women run afoul of several creepy foreign-seeming men. Once at their destination, they are separated and tortured at the same nightmarish location where Paxton saw Josh die.

COMMENTARY: Roger Ebert wrote a great opening line for his review of *Halloween 2* (1981). He wrote: "*It's a little sad to witness a fall from greatness*," and that turn-of-phrase has stuck with this author ever since first reading it in the 1980s. It's a fine way of expressing disappointment over an inferior, though not disastrous, sequel to a movie you love. Which brings us to *Hostel Part 2* (2007), the follow-

up to Eli Roth's brilliant 2005 horror film, one of the 2000's true horror masterpieces. But here's the diagnosis for what ails *Hostel 2: sequel-itis*. Here are the symptoms for this condition.

The element of surprise is gone. The audience already knows where the protagonists are headed and what's going to happen to them once they get there. The movie therefore wastes unnecessary time on the set-up and first act. The sequel adheres closely to the outline of the first film, only this time, tension is absent because familiarity breeds contempt.

The characters this time around are far less interesting. Whereas the boys of *Hostel* were smarmy, cocky, arrogant and nasty, they were, at least, interesting. The young women of *Hostel 2* are barely distinguishable. It's a cliché, but these girls aren't people, they're officially Victims In Waiting. For instance, once in Slovakia, shy Lorna goes off alone at night for a moonlit boat ride with a total stranger she meets at a party ... one who doesn't speak English. Of course, he promptly throws a black sack over Lorna's head, tosses her in the water, knocks her out and abducts her. The guys of *Hostel* weren't that stupid. Rather, they were drugged. Come to think of it, the bad guys weren't that stupid back in *Hostel* either: they went to some effort to hide their murderous activities, including sending cryptic text messages back to worried friends, and so forth. Here, everything's right out in the open for all to detect. The result: the movie has no sense of subtlety and therefore an essential quality of verisimilitude is missing.

The dread-filled, suspenseful (and somewhat realistic) murder scenes of the original *Hostel* have been replaced with what a character in *Wes Craven's Scream 2* (1997) termed "carnage candy." In the original *Hostel*, the camera stayed in the torture room—firmly planted—as the boys (Josh and Paxton) were tortured and maimed. Much of the tension arose from the fear of immobility, of entrapment. There seemed to be no escape. Their torturers were average-looking workaday butchers, anonymous serial killers off in their own little perverted fantasy lands. What one carried away from that film was the *terror of the chair*; of your life and death being in the hands of a anonymous stranger. *Hostel 2* utterly blows this conceit up by introducing a gorgeous super-model butcher (a woman...) who promptly disrobes, slices open a naked girl, hanging upside down, and then bathes exploitatively in a bath of her blood. The killer erotically and sensuously massages her breasts as she does so. This sequence represents a variation of the Bathory legend, but the industrial, grungy quality of the Slovakian torture rooms is sacrificed when the equivalent of a hot porn star takes center stage and performs, essentially, a "routine."

There's nothing real about this. And nothing scary about this, either.

The xenophobia in the sequel is ratcheted-up to absurd, nutty levels. So much so that it becomes a joke. It seems like every non-American is a conspirator, or evil. It's not a matter of knowing whom to trust, it's a matter of trusting no one.

Hostel 2 promptly becomes an exercise in convention, rather than innovation. The first scene of the film—in the traditional style of the slasher paradigm—involves killing the last survivor of the first movie. A clever writer might have incorporated the character as the lead, or simply gone in a new direction, leaving him out of the picture all together? As it stands, the scenes with Paxton are the best in the film because the audience feels invested in him and his survival. It knows what he's been through and has taken a harrowing journey with him. When the action shifts away from Paxton to the three cookie-cutter art students, all interest in the characters evaporates.

Hostel 2 also feels more stereotypically misogynist than its predecessor. Since when did Elite Hunting become an all-girl (victims') dormitory? I realize Roth attempts to inoculate himself from this charge by featuring a castration scene in the last act, but this unkindest cut of all is too little too late.

Situational logic gets thrown out the window. Take for example the fate of one of Elite Hunting's high-powered, rich American customers, played by Richard Burgi. Todd (Burgi) decides he can't go through with the murder of a girl and backs out. Rather than solve the issue diplomatically, the thugs at Elite Hunting unleash ferocious dogs and the canines *disembowel* him.

You tell me: *is that good business?*

Note to Elite Hunting: You don't stay in business long if word gets out to your customers that you will very likely kill them. The resolution of *Hostel 2* hinges on the fact that Elite Hunting is a business, first, killing ground second, and that money talks while bullshit walks. So why—in *that setting*—kill a

perfectly good customer? Why not lure him back with something else? Or tell him to come back with some of his buddies, when his courage is back? It makes no sense whatsoever, especially given the resolution of Beth's dilemma later. It's like a prostitute murdering her john because he can't get it up. More likely she'd say, "*it's okay dear ... come back next week ... oh, and no refund.*"

Despite all these problems, *Hostel 2* is not a terrible movie. The subplot involving Burgi and Bart (as Todd and Stuart, respectively)—two rich Americans on "vacation" at the killing grounds—is worthwhile and compelling. For instance, Roth utilizes split screens during a brief montage to show us the process of "bidding" on victims. The camera captures "respectable" men playing golf, in the boardroom, at home with their families, casually checking their BlackBerrys and under the nose of those around them, bidding for a chance to kill.

This sequence works amazingly well because it concerns the long-lived horror trope of the "underneath," the darkness that walks side-by-side with normality, often undetected. Todd and Stuart obviously feel neutered by what they would term a PC, feminized American society, and so decide, with a surfeit of machismo, to re-claim their God given roles as "hunters." Stuart goes to Elite Hunting because, as he tells Beth, he "*can't kill his wife.*" In Slovakia, his rage can find expression. This is quality, subversive material and it grants the largely suspense-less and mostly mechanical *Hostel 2* a real lift. The real meat of the story is a commentary on "civilized" American family men and what they do during their "hobby time." Had that been the steady focus, *Hostel Part 2* would have been a worthy sequel to Roth's transgressive original.

Yep, *Hostel 2* is a fall from greatness, all right. Still, give the devil his due: *Hostel 2*'s very last scene is some kind of delirious, inspired, over-the-top act of cinematic genius: a masterpiece of absurd *grand guignol* that elevates the film to some weird, oddly whimsical terrain. The audience won't be sure whether to scream or laugh, but this writer tips his hat to Roth for his outrageous finale. It's a remarkably confident and unconventional note to go out on, and one that makes the rest of *Hostel 2* seem even more mundane and conventional. If Roth had this much cheeky ingenuity up his sleeve, why not unfurl it much earlier?

I Am Legend * * *

Critical Reception

"Francis Lawrence's adaptation of Richard Matheson's iconic novella *I Am Legend* may go down as one of the most woefully miscalculated blockbusters in film history. In development for decades with names such as Ridley Scott and Arnold Schwarzenegger attached to it, the film finally hit screens in December 2007 after several rounds of challenging test screenings which altered the core meaning of the story.

Set in a post-apocalyptic New York City, Robert Neville (Will Smith) roams the barren streets reclaimed by nature with his trusty dog Sam hunting the wild animals who have returned to the city. They ensure to have all their daily activities seen to during daylight hours and lock themselves securely in their brownstone at night in fear of the Dark-seekers, violent vampire-like creatures who are the infected remains of humanity after a cure for cancer goes horribly wrong.

Matheson's original story remains powerful as a nuanced examination of a post-human experience of the world. It is a story that decenters humanity as the makers of meaning for the world. Test audiences, however, felt differently when presented with a similar (if softened) ending to Matheson's. In an interview in 2018 with the website Cinema Blend, Lawrence confirmed that testing scores for the film were incredibly weak and Warner Brothers who were spending \$159 million on the film, didn't want to risk a dour ending and opted to rewrite and reshoot the it to create a more sanitized and palatable version of the film.

The ending undoes many plot threads, moments and philosophical questions posed by the film in the first 90 minutes settling for pat answers and easy outs. While it's easy to blame a weak ending on a studio's lack of resolve, it also brands the film as one of the most emblematic post 9/11 studio films made. The film winds up amplifying the fears of America in the 2000s, fear of others, change, travel and upheaval. While the film when viewed on its own is a CGI mess, it's also one of the keenest insights into the American psyche, reifying the notion of American Exceptionalism at the dawn of a new millennium."—Alexandra West, author of *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity*.

"No one's ever made a faithful adaptation of Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*. Well, that's not true at all. *The Last Man on Earth* with Vincent Price is a faithful adaptation, one that Matheson had his name removed from after disagreeing with the casting and the European locations used to film his screenplay. *The Omega Man* with Charlton Heston has people who love it—but it's not a good adaptation of Matheson's novel. We may have to settle for this film as the best we're going to get. It's leaps and bounds better than *The Omega Man*—it's got a bigger budget and better locations than *The Last Man on Earth* and the deviations from Matheson's novel mostly made sense. How Will Smith's family is handled is emotionally affecting in similar ways to how things were handled in the novel, even if the events are very different.

There's only one problem. This film is much closer to a fast-zombie movie than it is to Matheson's apocalyptic tale of vampires that George Romero freely admitted was his inspiration for *Night of the Living Dead*—so the vampire/zombie connection has become so intertwined that you just want to shrug and say: Okay, I enjoyed the movie. I still like the novel better. And *The Last Man on Earth* is still more faithful to the novel. So, I'm calling this one a tie between *Last Man on Earth* and *I Am Legend*. The novel is a product of its times—it's a 1950s story. The film *I Am Legend* brings that closer to a new millennium kind of story. That's not a bad thing—but it's still not as good a remake as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or *The Fly* or *The Thing*."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Will Smith (Robert Neville); Alice Braga (Anna); Charlie Tahan (Ethan); Salli Richardson (Zoe Neville); Darrell Foster (Michael); Dan Mihuk (Alpha Male); Joanna Numata (Alpha Female); Emma Thompson (Dr. Alice Krippen)

CREW: Warner Bros. presents in association with Village Roadshow Pictures, Weed Road and Overbrook Entertainment, a Francis Lawrence Film, *I Am Legend*. Casting: Kathleen Chopin. Costume Designer: Michael Kaplan. Production Designer: Naomi Shohan. Music: James Newton Howard. Special Effects: Tatopoulos Studios, New Deal Studios, Sony Pictures Imageworks. Director of Photography: Andrew Lesnie. Film Editor: Wayne Wahrman. Producers: Akiva Goldsman David Heyman, James Lassiter, Neal H. Moritz. Executive Producers: Bruce Berman, Dana Goldberg, Erwin Stoff, Michael Tadross. Based on the novel by: Richard

Matheson. And based on the 1971 screenplay by: John William Corrington and Joyce Corrington. Written by: Mark Protosevich, Akiva Goldsman. Directed by: Francis Lawrence. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 101 minutes

SYNOPSIS: A scientist, Dr. Alice Krippen, believes that she has cured cancer. Unfortunately, her cure mutates to cause a virus that wipes out the majority of the human race. Those who don't die are transformed into nocturnal, day-fearing carnivores. In an evacuated New York City, scientist Robert Neville (Smith) attempts over the years to cure the Krippen virus, which he describes as "elegant." He does so with no human companionship, only the friendship of a dog, Sam. At the same time that he works in his laboratory to cure the virus, he scours the city for further information about the Hive, the new humanoid society that has cropped up in New York. Eventually, Neville befriends a woman and her son, even as the Hive mounts an attack on Neville's lab to free one of his inhuman guinea pigs.

COMMENTARY: Richard Matheson's 1954 novel has been made as a motion picture three times now. The first production was in 1964 with Vincent Price playing the titular *The Last Man on Earth*. The second time the story was vetted, the budget was bigger and the story's Christ metaphors were far more apparent, with *Planet of the Apes* (1968) star Charlton Heston taking on the role of Robert Neville in *The Omega Man* (1972). The baton of last man alive is passed to Will Smith in the 2007 film *I Am Legend*, and he carries it ably, delivering one of his most nuanced and human performances.

It is appropriate that *I Am Legend* was adapted again in the 2000s, the era of the zombie movie boom. Zombie movies feature, as a core element, the collapse of infrastructure and society. Citizens must deal not just with flesh-eating, stumbling hordes of monsters, but with the breakdown of law enforcement, the military, and civilian governance. With the arrival of zombies, comes, inevitably, the departure of man's civilization. The monsters in *I Am Legend* are not zombies, technically, rather infected mutants, but the underlying milieu is the same as the one described above. This is an "empty city" movie, in which the survivor, Neville, is forced to grapple with evidence of the old world all around him, on marquees and in stores and in his memories, but must reckon with the idea that it is gone too, consigned to the scrap heap of history.

The setting of Manhattan, and its description by Neville as "*Ground Zero*" for the infection, clearly summons images of the 9/11 attacks, even as it presages in some ways the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, where New York City quickly became a hot zone in the spring of that year. Inherent in Matheson's novel, and captured in all film versions of the story, is the existential horror of having outlived the rest of your race. Neville presides over mankind's graveyard, but he can't let go of the old world, even as a new order rises.

Like *The Omega Man*, *I Am Legend* focuses on Neville as a kind of obsessive zealot who still believes he can "*fix this*," and bring the world back to what it was. That's a delusion, of course, and in the end, he must settle for helping a woman refugee and her son get to a safe outpost in Vermont. The flashbacks in the film showing the evacuation of the city and Neville's family, not only recall the terrifying, panic-ridden imagery of 9/11, but help showcase why Neville is so obsessed. He lost his family, and his world ... their world. Bringing back their world is a way of helping to heal. Neville wants to bring back the world, too because in the new world, "*social de-evolution appears complete*."

In other words, he is lonely.

But what makes this edition of the story so fascinating, perhaps, is the idea that Neville, an African American man, is biased in his "scientific" studies of the infected. Although he loves his dog, Sam, and sees it as an individual, he does not feel the same way about the "dark seekers." To him, they are subjects to be experimented on, and monsters. Yet, as the film makes clear, they seem to possess some protean sense of family, and therefore qualities such as loyalty and love. The hive attacks Neville's lab because he is holding one of their kind as a prisoner. In this film, Neville is not a Christ figure, whose blood (and mortal sacrifice) will save the human race. He is a blind obsessive living in the past, who refuses to

recognize that the life around him, though it is different, is still life. This is not to say that the dark seekers can be made peace with, or that they don't kill humans. Only that evolution has decided, apparently, that man as he was had to be kicked from his perch atop all life on Earth. A new order has come, and even with a cure, Neville can't turn back time and bring back a world that has seen 5.4 billion humans die, according to the film's stats.

At one point, it is noted in the film that "*you could cure racism and hate by injecting music and love into a person's life.*" The Neville the audience meets at the start of the film is a man who has not had love in his life in a long time. It is not until his "*social de-evolution*" is reversed, by the presence of a woman and child, Anna and Ethan, that he can start to rebuild, in a very real sense, both his sanity and his sense of human morality. He gives the blood sample to Anna to take with her to Vermont, hoping it could provide the key to the human race. But he has had to give up on his family, and on things being the way they once were.

I Am Legend occurs during the twilight of humanity, and to visually suggest that passage, the film features some lovely apricot-hued footage, golden-orange light reflecting on the glass skyscrapers of a city lost. At other times, the camera adopts the God's Eye View of the city, looking straight down to street level from high above. In this case, the extreme high angle shot suggests the world as petri dish; and of Neville as the person under the microscope, the person we study as an oddity and rarity in the new world order.

Visually and thematically, the film is quite accomplished, and it is easy to understand why the film was such a big hit. It captures the apocalyptic age of the post 9/11/2001 era, but also tells the human story of a man who has outlived everything meaningful in his life.

Three issues, perhaps, hamper the film from going beyond good to great. The first is that the film largely misses the idea of the title, that Neville is the boogeyman for the new hive. Unlike the Family in *The Omega Man*, the Dark Seekers here do not have much of a society (again, social de-evolution). They are showing the inklings of consciousness, family and other so-called "human" ideals, but one has a difficult time imagining these creatures telling bed-time stories to their young about the boogeyman who hunts them while they sleep, in the daylight hours. This aspect of the story doesn't work, and is neglected, and that's a shame. This Neville, as noted above, boasts a blind spot or bias involving the dark seekers, unable to see them as anything but a disease he must fix. So, to turn him into a kind of "legend" for the hive-seekers could conceivably make a lot of sense.

The second issue is, simply, the visualization of the Dark Seekers. They are depicted using CGI that looked bad in 2007, and actually looks laughable in 2020. So much of the story depends on Neville's dawning awareness that he is the one socially de-evolved, and that the Dark Seekers, whatever their differences from humanity, are evolving. Therefore, for the creatures to be cartoonish-looking monsters that can't stand up to scrutiny for any reasonable duration harms the film's overall success. That noted, the early scenes of dimly lit open doorways and the hints of Dark Seekers' presence are very well-orchestrated.

The third and final issue is that *I Am Legend's* ending is, simply stated, Hollywood nonsense. The need to give the film a happy ending is, perhaps, understandable given the budget of the enterprise. But it is also largely unnecessary. Neville saves Anna and Ethan, and gives them a tool, the serum, to help humanity. That is the end of the story, because this is Neville's tale. It is *I Am Legend*, not *The Human Race Survives*. Therefore, the unnecessary coda at the colony in Vermont only serves to move focus off the story's central character, and his journey.

Lastly, one of the key complaints from long-time sci-fi, superhero and horror films of the decade of 2000s was the notion of remaking films and TV shows, but gender swapping characters, or changing their skin color. Indeed, some fans of the Vincent Price and Charlton Heston adaptations, as well as the original novel, complained about Neville becoming, in this version, a black man.

Yet that is one of the key aspects of the film that makes it as powerful as it is. Will Smith's performance is nuanced and human in a way that Heston's or Price's is not. They portray strength and determination, but don't transmit as nearly as broken down as Smith's Neville does. Being the last person on earth would indeed break any man, or woman. And, with great respect for both Heston and

Price, two horror legends, it is Smith's performance in the role that best captures the vulnerability. Also, by featuring an African American man as a character who can't see others for what they are, who possesses, let's say, a racial blind spot, those elements of the tale come to the forefront more powerfully. The universality of prejudice and bigotry comes through loud and clear in this version, in a way that is meaningful.

The Invasion ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"The fourth, and the least, of the movies made from Jack Finney's classic science fiction novel *The Body Snatchers*. Here is a great story born to be creepy, and the movie churns through it like a road company production. If the first three movies served as parables for their times, this one keeps shooting off parable rockets that fizzle out."—*Citizens Voice*, January 28, 2008, page T23.

"...it's not quite as terrible as the troubled production history might indicate. It's a moderately compelling sci-fi action movie with a handful of scary scenes—though nothing at all special, and only a shadow of the original or even its 1978 remake."—William Arnold, *The Record*, August 20, 2007, page B4.

"...*The Invasion* feels a bit like an sf film that has been infected and radically transformed by an invading alien force—in this case, that of a Hollywood tradition that assumes audiences cannot and will not sit still for a slow-paced intellectual thriller. Having said that, it is still worth renting, if only to see how this film attempts to add something new to what is quickly becoming the grand tradition of *Body Snatcher* remakes."—Lisa Yaszek, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, Spring 2011, pages 141–146.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Nicole Kidman (Carol Bennell); Daniel Craig (Ben Driscoll); Jeremy Northam (Tucker Kaufman); Jackson Bond (Oliver); Jeffrey Wright (Dr. Stephen Galeano); Veronica Cartwright (Wendy Lenk); Josef Sommer (Dr. Henryk Belicec); Celia Weston (Ludmilla Belicec); Roger Rees (Yorish); Eric Benjamin (Gene); Susan Floyd (Pam); Stephanie Berry (Carly); Alexis Raben (Belicec's Aide); Adam LeFevre (Richard Lenk); Joanna Merlin (Joan Kauf-man).

CREW: Warner Bros, Village Roadshow Pictures, Silver Pictures in association with Vertigo Entertainment present *The Invasion*. Casting: Ronna Kress. Production Designer: Jack Fisk. Costume Designer: Jacqueline West. Special Effects: Bill Alldridge, Masters FX, Hydraulx. Music: John Ottman. Director of Photography: Rainer Klausmann. Film Editors: Hans Funck, Joel Negron. Producer: Joel Silver. Executive Producers: Bruce Berman, Doug Davison, Susan Downey, Roy Lee, Steve Richards, Ronald G. Smith. Based on the book by: Jack Finney. Written by: David Kajganich. Directed by: Oliver Hirschbiegel. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After the crash of the U.S. space shuttle *Patriot*, an alien life-form it brought to Earth with it begins to infect the human population of the planet, transforming people into emotionless, loveless people. Psychiatrist Carol Bennell (Kidman), sees a rash of clients, including Wendy (Cartwright), who believe that the people in their lives are actually imposters. Meanwhile, Carol's husband, Tucker (Northam), works at the CDC and is infected with the alien disease, which he propagates. As the invasion of the Earth widens, Carol, scientist Ben Driscoll (Craig) and Tucker and Carol's son, Oliver (Bond), go on the run in an attempt to escape it. Oliver may hold the clue to stopping the aliens, as he appears to be immune to the change.

COMMENTARY: Every decade gets *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* it deserves. Or perhaps the version it needs.

The 1978 original directed by Don Siegel took on McCarthyism (or was it communism?) The 1978 remake starring Donald Sutherland and Veronica Cartwright involved the rise of the “Me” Generation in a “Crisis of Confidence” America. The 1990s *Body Snatchers* from Abel Ferrara was set on a military base and dealt with conformity in the Army, and also in America’s classrooms.

Although it was the recipient of negative reviews, 2007’s *Invasion* carries on the best tradition of this unofficial franchise. Like the other films in the series, it holds a mirror up to America, and asks the culture to look at itself. In this case, the film asks the audience to consider the following question: Has our widespread use of prescription drugs already taken away our ability to feel emotions? Is the alien invasion of emotionlessness any worse than what we are already doing to ourselves?

Of course, *The Invasion* boasts the weakness and drawbacks of its era. The term “body snatchers” has been removed from the title for fear that it will be interpreted as campy, or old fashioned, an unnecessary hedge that reminds one of *Man of Steel*’s (2013) unwillingness to call Superman “Superman,” for fear it would sound hokey. *The Invasion* is a shortened title for an age with a shortened attention span.

The film also devolves into big action scenes, instead of remaining a personal, suspenseful drama about alienation in relationships. Again, this change in presentation is symptomatic of the movie business in the 2000s. An expensive movie with stars like Daniel Craig and Nicole Kidman has one chance and one chance only to make its money back: a first-place opening weekend slot. If it fails in capturing that prize, it won’t make its considerable budget back. This means any niche material has to be removed, and the movie requires action, stars, special effects and other virtues to appeal to the widest audience possible.

But dismiss those drawbacks as much as possible, if you can. Credit such weaknesses to the movie being a product and reflection of the time when it was made. On even its own limited terms, *Invasion* is a worthy heir to the other films in the series. Specifically, *The Invasion* makes some clever and thoughtful points about humanity’s warring nature, and also its fear about itself over that emotional, impulsive nature. This is the first film in the property’s long history, for example, that takes on the widespread use of prescription drugs in America.

Writing in very broad terms, psychiatric drugs do one thing, primarily: they “flatten” out moods and emotions, so that users don’t have to grapple with uncomfortable feelings or ideas. If drug users are numbed by their medication, they don’t have to ask why they feel depressed, why they are lonely, or why they have feelings of unresolved anger and resentment. Instead, they can just flatten out all those difficult-to-grapple with emotions by taking a pill, or a regimen of pills. It’s so much easier to pop a pill than it is to actually confront one’s own problems, isn’t it? According to CNN’s Elizabeth Cohen, based on statistics from the CDC, there were 118 million prescriptions for anti-depressants in America in 2005.²⁰ The most prescribed drugs in America at that time were antidepressants such as Paxil, Prozac and Lexapro. By 2013, just six years after the release of *The Invasion*, studies showed that 70 percent of Americans take at least one prescription drug.²¹

What is the societal impact of such widespread prescription medication use? The great horror director Wes Craven often focused his films on the idea that feelings and emotions suppressed would reassert themselves as symptoms of new pathologies, and violence, for example. In *The Invasion*, the characters reckon with an alien invasion that takes away emotions, but the goal of the people in the film is, simply, to modulate their moods, to control their emotions, in the same way. Consider that when Carol’s patient, Wendy (Veronica Cartwright), claims that her husband is not her husband, Carol’s immediate response is “I’m going to change your medication.”

Indeed, the first shots of the film are of prescription drugs, of Adderall and Clonazepam. These are followed by views of characters gulping Mountain Dew at 3:30 in the morning. Taken in combination, these shots suggest a humanity that is modulating, constantly, its mental space, its moods, its consciousness even, by medications or substances such as caffeine.

The use of substances and in particular prescription drugs to alter our consciousness is woven throughout the film. “Make sure you take your pills,” a character implores. “Can a pill help me understand Iraq? Or even New Orleans?” Scenes are set in the “Good Neighbor Pharmacy” and the audience sees

close ups of drug names such as Risperdal, the lead alien notes to Carol, “*You give people pills to make their lives better? Why is what we do so different?*”

That is the great unanswered question of the film.

Humanity as portrayed here is a species afraid to feel its own emotions and bound and determined to suppress them through pills. Why is it so terrible, then, to be faced with a virus that removes human emotions? For the first time in the *Body Snatcher* movies, the movies note that the alien’s work is already being done for them. By us. “*All you have to do is nothing*,” the aliens assert. That seems a reference to the fact that medication precludes people from doing the hard work; from actually changing the things they don’t like about their lives; for changing themselves and their own hearts.

The film adopts the alien point of view in another way, as well. News programs featured in the film report the “*bloodiest attack in Iraq since the beginning of the Occupation*,” for example, and once the aliens are in control, all fighting stops. On TV, the end of the Korean conflict is reported. No suicide attacks are registered in Kabul. And even racism and sexism ends. “Your family is family now,” an alien-possessed human declares. “*In our world, there is no other*.”

Make no mistake, the aliens in this film actually achieve world peace. They achieve what we claim we desire as a species, and don’t have to medicate us to give it to us.

When the aliens are defeated, the wars and conflicts resume, and the old hatreds return too. What, then, is the film’s message? Perhaps only that we medicate ourselves so often and so regularly so we can feel numb to the ugly world we have created, to the violence we foster, to the bad-will towards other people that seem a part and parcel of the modern human existence. But as long as we feel numb to war, racism, and hatred of all types, we won’t change it.

Instead, we’ll just keep popping pills.

In exploring this new and perhaps dangerous facet of American life in the 21st century, *The Invasion* honors the lineage and legacy of the *Body Snatcher* films. This movie uses—and uses well—the nature of American culture in 2007 to hold up a mirror for us that shows us our weaknesses. This *Body Snatchers* movie thus speaks to 2007 the same way that the Kaufman version spoke to 1978, or the Siegel version spoke to 1956. An interesting difference is that few critics this time were willing or able to note, explain or highlight the social commentary of the film. Instead, the film was dismissed as just another inferior remake in an age of inferior remakes.

And they can be forgiven for that, because, certainly, *The Invasion* is not without flaws, despite its high level social commentary. Again, proving itself a product of its time, the film bends over backwards to resolve the invasion and provide movie-goers a happy ending. But of course, what else could be expected in an age in which people confronted with ambiguity and difficult emotions would rather “do nothing” but pop a pill and not think the hard thoughts.

The Invasion is artistic enough to recognize this impulse but concerned with commerce enough to provide a Hollywood happy ending. That stated, *The Invasion* would be a perfect movie to show young film students for a lesson about context, and the way that context—political, historical, cultural—informs a movie. This movie uses the traumas of the 2000s (Iraq, Katrina, the *Columbia* crash in 2003) to explore the way that modern Americans avoid trauma.

They just head to the Good Neighbor Pharmacy, take their pills, and tune out.

The Messengers * * ½

Critical Reception

“...a stylish but almost completely generic thriller...[I]t’s good for scaring 14-year-old girls and impressing budding cinematographers, and that, friends, is it.”—Ty Burr, *The Spectator*: “Horror by the book; *The Messengers*,” February 6, 2007, page G14.

“The half-dozen scenes of utter, ineffable terror aren’t enough to redeem the Pang Bros’ movie, which is

hampered by hauntingly lame performances by McDermott and Miller, who phone in their parts, and a screenplay that has the sophistication and complexity of a college dorm message board.”—Tirdad Derakhshani, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 3, 2007, page D5.

“It’s aimed squarely at Kristen Stewart fans, most of whom probably haven’t seen a lot of horror movies and therefore to whom all of this is brand new and exciting. As for myself, I was ticking off all of the standard horror movies tropes as they passed predictably by. There’s nothing wrong with the movie as such, it’s professionally done, has a dependable supporting cast and the effects are decent, but neither is there anything outstanding or even memorable about it.”—Daniel King, *Horror News Net*, September 8, 2011.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kristen Stewart (Jess); Dylan McDermott (Roy); Penelope Ann Miller (Denise); John Corbett (Burwell); Evan Turner (Ben); William B. Davis (Colby Price); Brent Briscoe (Plume); Dustin Milligan (Bobby); Jodelle Ferland (Michael Rollins); Michael Daingerfield (Police Officer); Tatiana Maslany (Lindsay Rollins); Shirley McQueen (Mary Rollins); Anna Hagan (Doctor); Blaine Hart (Charlie); Graham Bell (Jim).

CREW: Screen Gems, Ghost House Pictures and Columbia Pictures Present, with Blue Star Pictures, Scarecrow Productions and Mandate Pictures, *The Messengers*. Production Designer: Alicia Keywan. Costume Designer: Mary Hyde-Kerr, Cathy McComb. Special Effects: Tatopoulos Studios, iO Film, Technical, Michael Kaelin & Associates, Inc. Music: Joseph LoDuca. Director of Photography: David Geddes. Film Editing: John Axelrad, Armen Minasian, Tim Mirkovich. Producers: Sam Raimi, William Sherak, Jason Sherman, Rob Taper. Executive Producers: Joe Drake, Nathan Kahane. Story by: Todd Farmer. Written by: Mark Wheaton. Directed by The Pang Brothers. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Some years ago, in their North Dakota farmhouse, a young boy and his mother are attacked and killed by what appears to be a malevolent—and powerful—supernatural force. Now, a down-on-its-luck family from Chicago led by Roy Solomon (McDermott) and his wife (Miller) buys the land and the house in hopes of starting up the old sunflower farm again. With them are their two children, teenage Jess (Stewart) and mute little Ben (Turner). As the family settles in, Dad meets two locals. One is a bank official (Davis) representing another party who he wants to buy the property. The other local is a sensitive farm hand, Burwell (Corbett), who stays on and agrees to work for free until the sunflower harvest. Meanwhile, inside the house, Ben sees disturbing visions of weird, unquiet ghosts. Before long, Jess is seeing them too. And then, on one evening when she is home in the house with just Ben, there’s a poltergeist attack, and Jess is nearly pulled down the stairs by the seemingly malevolent spirits. Stranger yet, crows circle the property at all times, threatening to swoop down and attack the family.

COMMENTARY: *The Messengers* should be a lot better than it turned out to be. And, perhaps if it were made in another decade, it could have been better, indeed. Had it been made in the 1970s, it might have come across as part-*Burnt Offerings* and part-*The Other*. However, it is useless to fantasize about what the film might have been. Instead, focusing on what it actually is, *The Messengers* is a PG-13, CGI-reliant mess with a few atmospheric moments that are genuinely scary and atmospheric.

One will note from the film’s credits that this is a Ghost House production; meaning that Sam Raimi is a producer, and his horror credits are certainly impeccable. Also, Joseph LoDuca, the composer from the original *Evil Dead* trilogy, has crafted a creepy, memorable score. In other words, he’s done his typical great work. The lead actress, intense young, pre-*Twilight* Kristen Stewart, is also a believable performer and although she certainly has her detractors, one must compare Stewart to leads in other horror flicks of this vintage (*When a Stranger Calls*’ Camilla Belle leaps to mind). Stewart compares favorably, exuding intelligence and believability as Jess.



Jess (Kristen Stewart) suspects a supernatural force is at work in *The Messengers* (2007).

Nothing much happens in the first half of the movie and yet it still remains compelling. The compositions boast a cockeyed look about them; an off-kilter sensibility that keep the viewer feeling off-balance. And, there's a tremendously atmospheric scene in which Jess and Ben walk around the house interior and Jess asks her little brother to point out the invisible ghosts to her. He does so, and the results are creepy as hell. There's a moment in this sequence wherein Jessica and Ben are looking one way, and an out-of-focus *something* moves towards them—coming forward (and into focus) from the background. This image of approaching terror is not easily forgotten and it's quite potent. Much of the movie's first half is just like this: stylishly vetted "little" moments that one hopes will build to real terror later.



Amidst the sunflowers: Jess (Kristen Stewart) contemplates the strange goings-on at her new home in *The Messengers* (2007).

But then, about two-thirds of the way through, *The Messengers* goes off the rails with a narrative twist so stupid and banal that it literally ruins the rest of the film. It's just about the worst third act "surprise" you'll find in a horror film of this decade. This twist is preceded by a horrible CGI crow attack, comes up out of the blue and leads into a series of horrible flashbacks revealing what "really" happened to the family from the prologue. And the performance that's related to this "twist" is atrocious. It's a bad bit of miscasting; the actor who vets the material is out-of-his-depth and it's not merely obvious, it's embarrassing. Unfortunately, the twist is so important to the plot that it sort of retroactively pours cold water on all the parts of the movie that were likeable from the first half. Watching the last act, one realizes none of the earlier, creepier moments make any sense whatsoever in light of the new revelation.



John (John Corbett) hides a dark secret in *The Messengers* (2007).

Among the many questions one may ask while watching: why does the cellar door spontaneously unlock when it does? Why is the cellar floor sometimes earthen and sometimes not? Is the “earthen” floor real or an illusion (because physical, biological matter has to go somewhere). Worse, given what is learned at the conclusion of the film, why do the ghosts make contact with the family in terms that are so clearly “an attack?”

Also, who is the Cigarette Smoking Man (William B. Davis), and how does his character really fit in with the narrative? Lastly, a film grammar question: why—even when things are resolved—don’t the directors alter their cockeyed compositions? By the end of the film, the audience realizes that the writers haven’t been playing fair; and that the story seems to be made up as it goes along. That seems a true dishonor to the good work done by the composer, the lead actor, and others.

Don’t kill the messenger, all right?

The Mist ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“*The Mist* builds towards a climax so wrenching that I hesitate to recommend the film, but I think Darabont earns his vision.”—David Edelstein, *New York Magazine*, November 26, 2007.

“Frank Darabont is the go-to guy for Stephen King movies. *Shawshank* is a masterpiece. *The Green Mile* would probably be more beloved if *Shawshank* didn’t exist, but it’s still one of those drop-the-remote films. But where these two films are in many ways warm-hearted in the midst of darkness, *The Mist* goes full-on dark. Stephen King likes to wander into Lovecraftian territory from time to time, sometimes just a glimpse here and there, sometimes full bore, and *The Mist* was definitely the latter, with Lovecraftian critters running around in our universe. Surprisingly, Darabont went with a darker ending than King’s novella, and part of me always wondered if this was in some ways a response to *Shawshank*—where Darabont famously wanted to skip the moment where our two heroes meet on that beach—he wanted to put his stamp on the ending this time, and he certainly accomplished that. It’s an ending of almost *Twilight Zone* proportions with its twist that will stick with you long after the rest of the film has been forgotten.

In my more twisted moments, I compare this film to *Maximum Overdrive* (they’re both siege movies a la John Carpenter via every western that Carpenter absorbed into his writing DNA while studying Howard Hawks)—and while the ending is memorable, and *The Mist* is competently made, given a choice, I’d almost always prefer to watch the truck with the Green Goblin face terrorizing the voice of Lisa Simpson, and I don’t quite know why, but I do have my suspicions. Outside of playing with other people’s toys as both a screenwriter and a director (Stephen King, *The Blob*, Freddy Krueger, *The Fly 2*, even *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*), *The Mist* was Darabont’s first film after *The Majestic* which wasn’t really based on a known commodity—if there’s a failed film in Darabont’s filmography, it’s *The Majestic*—which should have put Darabont into the land of Oscar-bait and serious dramas given its subject matter—and didn’t (it’s my least favorite of his films, and I’m probably not alone).

Before diving into still someone else’s toybox with *The Walking Dead*, *The Mist* was Darabont going back into safe territory, but creatively, one has to wonder if he felt the walls closing in—he was being typecast not into a particular genre but into a particular author’s work. I don’t know that we’ve ever really heard Frank Darabont’s voice, and that makes me sad. If you’ve read ‘Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption’ you know that Darabont out-Kinged Stephen King—his editorial decisions made the film better than the novella. With *The Mist* I’m not sure that happened. The novella ends on at least a possibility of some hope. The film solves the problem, it looks like the problem is contained, but our hero, in trying to be merciful, has cursed himself. He’ll never be able to live with himself. It’s a memorable ending. It was also cruel. To the audience. I think the ‘unfair ending’ card can’t be played very often. Burgess Meredith’s glasses can break on the library steps in *The Twilight Zone*, and the character of Ben can get shot at the end of *Night of the Living Dead* and I think we’re done. *The Mist* is a good film, but I don’t ever want to watch it again—it seriously felt like the director flipped us the bird out of sheer malevolence.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster*.

“...or ‘Who’s Afraid Of What’s In The Mist.’ An intense siege film as well as a psychological test of how people react in a crisis (spoiler alert: it’s not good). The nihilistic ending will either blow audience members away or infuriate them. Marcia Gay Harden is strangely alluring as the religious fanatic who’s more monstrous than

any of the prehistoric creatures hidden in the mist.”—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Thomas Jane (David Drayton); Marcia Gay Harden (Mrs. Carmody); Laurie Holden (Amanda Dunfrey); Andre Braugher (Brent Norton); Toby Jones (Ollie Weeks); William Sadler (Jim); Jeffrey DeMunn (Dan Miller); Frances Sternhagen (Irene Reppler); Nathan Gamble (Billy Drayton); Alexa Davalos (Sally); Chris Owen (Norm); Sam Witwer (Private Jessup); Robert Treveiler (Bud Brown); David Jensen (Myron); Melissa McBride (Woman with Kids at home); Andy Stahl (Mike); Buck Taylor (Ambrose Cornell); Brandon O'Dell (Bobby Eagleton); Jackson Hurst (Joe Eagleton).

CREW: M.G.M. and Dimension Films presents a Darkwoods, The Weinstein Company Film, *The Mist*. Casting: Deborah Aquila, Jen Smith, Tricia Wood. Costume Designer: Giovanna Ottobre-Melton. Production Designer: Gregory Melton. Music: Mark Isham. Special Effects: CafeFX, K.N.B. Effects Group, Look Effects, RotoFactory, Digital Dream. Director of Photography: Rohn Schmidt. Film Editor: Hunter M. Via. Producers: Frank Darabont, Liz Glotzer. Executive Producers: Richard Saperstein, Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein. Based on the novel by: Stephen King. Written and Directed by: Frank Darabont. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 126 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Bridgton, Maine, a top-secret military experiment, “Project Arrowhead,” goes wrong, opening up a portal to an alternate dimension populated by carnivorous, monstrous creatures. Bridgton’s populace at first sees only a heavy mist, and a thunderstorm blanketing the town. David Drayton (Jane) and his son, Billy (Gamble), head to the local grocery store, unaware of the real danger, and become trapped there with other shoppers when the monsters lay siege to it, and the town. Among those trapped in the grocery store with David and Billy are a teacher, Amanda (Holden), and a woman, Mrs. Carmody (Gay Harden), who is a fundamentalist religious fanatic and believes that the godless should be sacrificed to the monsters to appease them. Soon, the trapped shoppers fall into tribal factions, those who support Mrs. Carmody’s version of reality, and those who accept David’s. Eventually, David, Billy, Amanda and others make an escape to the parking lot, but the mist is pervasive, as well as all the terror it cloaks, and David comes to a fateful decision.

COMMENTARY: Stephen King’s novella *The Mist* was first published in 1980, and then again in 1985 as part of the *Skeleton Crew* collection. King has gone on record noting that the story explicitly concerns religious fanaticism, and Darabont’s film carries that thematic thread faithfully. However, the film’s release in 2007 also focuses on a new, tangentially related problem that was occurring in the 2000s: the polarization of American citizens into “red state” citizens and “blue state” citizens. In particular, these tribes possess not only different belief systems, but “alternative” facts. In short, red state citizens, fed a steady diet of Fox News, believe a different set of facts than those who inhabit blue states. In 2017, Kellyanne Conway, adviser to President Trump, asserted that the red state folks simply have “*alternative facts*,” but don’t believe lies.

But the problem had started a decade before, in the Iraq War. In the first decade of the 21st century, America’s War on Terror had further divided American people along those red/blue lines. Every week, officials from the Bush Administration got on National TV programs like *Meet the Press* and asserted that things were going well in Iraq, even as the country descended into violence and more American soldiers were dying. Many red state citizens, equating support of the Administration for support for our troops, believed the information, that Americans would be “*greeted as liberators*,” that the occupation was “*turning a corner*,” and that the insurgency was in its “*last throes*.” Further, they believed the pre-emptive war in Iraq was necessary because Iraq’s Saddam Hussein was somehow tied to the 9/11 attacks and Osama Bin Laden, and that he was developing weapons of mass destruction. No weapons of mass destruction were ever found, and no connection between Hussein and Bin Laden was ever produced.

Meanwhile, Blue State citizens protested the war, and saw that protest as patriotic, and did not believe the “good news” that the Administration kept parroting. President Bush declared the Coalition of the Willing victorious after flying onto the U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003, while speaking in front of a banner that read “Mission: Accomplished.”

But in 2020, American armed forces were still in Iraq.

Yet, at the time, two different realities dominated America. One reality saw America winning the War on Terror and being successful in Iraq. The other saw America trapped in a quagmire of its own making. This problem of “alternate” facts has grown exponentially in the American consciousness since the first decade of the 2000s, with the Presidency of Donald Trump. He insisted his inauguration drew the biggest crowds in American history, while photos of the event showed that was not the case; and that Barack Obama’s inauguration had been better attended. But red staters believed Trump, and blue staters believed the evidence of their own eyes. Soon, the messenger was targeted. If the facts disagreed with President Trump, they were “fake news,” to be dismissed as part of a “lamestream media” conspiracy to hurt him.

What chance does a society have for survival, civility and peace if its citizens are so polarized that they can’t even agree on what constitutes reality?

What does the future hold for this society if science, and documentary evidence can be ignored as “fake news” or an attempt to diminish a leader, and not as arbiters of reality?

The Mist, released in 2007, understands the nature of the problem, and sees it for what it is: the breakdown of a civil society which has lost the educational foundation, and indeed, the personal temperament to rationally consider evidence and science, before assessing its partisan, religious, or tribal impact. The grocery store in *The Mist* is a microcosm for America, and this problem. A crisis occurs (a corollary for the 9/11 attacks, or the War in Iraq, but with a sci-fi/horror bent, and the Americans in the grocery store, from two tribes, cannot agree even on basic facts). Mrs. Carmody, a religious fanatic in an age in which religious liberty was being used as a cudgel to limit personal rights in issues including gay marriage, believes that the attack by monsters is a result of God’s anger over issues such as stem cell research and abortions.

Importantly, this is not a stretch or an exaggeration of this radical religious viewpoint. Jerry Falwell, founder of Liberty University, for example, blamed the 9/11 attacks on Blue America while appearing on Pat Robertson’s *The 700 Club*. He noted:

The abortionists have got to bear some burden of this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, “You helped this happen.”²²

After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, religious fundamentalists also sought to cast the natural event as a punishment for sin. For example, Bill Shanks of the New Covenant Fellowship of New Orleans thanked God for the hurricane and is reported as saying: “*New Orleans is now abortion free. New Orleans is now Mardi Gras free. New Orleans now is free of Southern Decadence and the sodomites, the witchcraft workers, false religion—it’s free of all those things now.*”²³ In *The Mist*, Mrs. Carmody is absolutely aligned with this thinking. She believes that anything bad that occurs is God’s wrath against those who disagree with her faith.

The scary part of the film is not so much Mrs. Carmody’s rantings, but the fact that so many Americans in that grocery store, desperate to feel safe, align themselves with her. Even with monsters bashing in the windows, these people would rather hate their fellow man, and fellow Americans, and claim a self-righteous knowledge of what God desires than devise a plan that saves everybody.

Yet, impressively, *The Mist* is not one-sided. Mrs. Carmody, a MAGA acolyte in the making, no doubt, creates and lives in her own alternate reality (as the monsters have arrived from an alternate reality, too), but no one is immune to their own viewpoint, their own biases. The original novella did not end the same as Darabont’s film ends, however. In the film, David, believing there is no escape from the mist and a horrible death, kills his son and those in the car with him. Moments later, he is rescued by

the Army. His act—which was meant to end suffering—is revealed to have been short-sighted. His son could have lived if he had not acted so pre-emptively.

But the point is this: David is not immune to his own biases either. *The Mist's* climactic, tragic ending is a reminder that it isn't merely Mrs. Carmody who is a victim to "alternative facts." We are all victims, in one way or another, of our own belief systems. So, yes, in one sense, David's pre-emptive act of merciful murder is an allusion to the pre-emptive war in Iraq, an attempt to neutralize a threat not yet proven or at the front door, so to speak. Yet it is also a warning to those who think themselves superior to the Carmodys of the world. No one is immune, especially in the era of social media, to bubbles of information that reinforce their own belief systems, at the expense of good-sense, science, or even, basically, reality.

Even the central threat of the film, "the mist" itself, reinforces this idea. The mist clouds vision. It reduces visibility. It creates a "fog" that can't be seen through. In a nutshell, this is the world of 24-hour cable news, and social media, which creates a dense fog through which many can't see clearly or determine fact. "*Maybe we'll get clear of the mist,*" one character hopes wistfully, and yet, when clear of the mist, those who make it almost immediately see Exit 11, which seems a reference, perhaps, to 9/11, and the fact that the terrorist attack created a detour from which America could not escape.

And what is found beyond?

More mist.

So, while the novella focused on the very real dangers of religious fanaticism, the movie has been updated to suggest that an America divided will fall. Diverse Americans, under siege, turn on each other. Instead of rallying around one another, they become tribal (like the film's out-of-towners vs. townies schism). The diverse Americans under siege read the same set of events, the same set of facts in different ways, and end up killing each other. The revamped ending, with a reasonable man murdering his own son, pre-emptively, suggests not only the context of the War on Terror (and the Iraq Theatre, specifically), but the idea that even those who believe they know the facts are not fully informed; cannot see outside the partisan fog that has clouded America, and harmed it, perhaps irrevocably.

The Mist is one of the great horror films of the 2000s because it cuts through the fog, and comments meaningfully on the issue of the time: the fact that Americans not only distrusted and blamed one another for the "bad" things happening in the culture and in the world, but that given a set of facts, they could not agree, even on reality. If, in 1968, George Romero's siege movie *Night of the Living Dead* made the farmhouse a microcosm for racial strife in America, in 2007, Darabont's *The Mist* used a grocery store to show how there are "two Americas," and they not only disagree on belief systems, but on reality itself.

Mulberry Street (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Nick Damaci (Clutch); Kim Blair (Casey); Ron Brice (Coco); Bo Corre (Kay); Tim House (Ross); Larry Fleischman (Charlie); Larry Meedich (Frank); Javier Picayo (Otto); Antone Pagan (Peter); John Hoyt (Big Vic); Lou Torres (Bartender); Sarah Dickinson (Little Girl); Heidi Peterson (Woman); Jim Heater (Priest).

CREW: After Dark Films, Belladonna Productions and Mulberry Street Films LLC present *Mulberry Street*. Production Design: Beth Mickle. Costume Designer: Vonia Arslanian. Music by: Andreas Kapsalis. Special Effects: Eyespot Pictures. Director of Photography: Ryan Samul. Film Editor: Jim Mickle. Producers: Adam Folk, Linda Mora. Executive Producers: Victor Assante, Tim House. Written by: Nick Damaci and Jim Mickle. Directed by: Jim Mickle. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Manhattan, a real estate tycoon named Crome buys up property to gentrify neighborhoods. He has just purchased a rat-infested apartment building and plans to evict all the

denizens there. At the same time, rat attacks proliferate around the city, and a strange infection spreads, overrunning local hospitals. One apartment dweller, Clutch (Damaci), navigates the rat attacks, the sickness, and the impending eviction on the same night he intends to welcome home his daughter, Casey (Blair), an Iraq War veteran.

COMMENTARY: *Mulberry Street* is a no-budget horror affair that has much to offer, at least assuming one isn't in search of some mainstream, special effects showcase. Pervading the film, though unseen, is a person called Crome, an obvious surrogate for real estate mogul Donald Trump. Pretty clearly, Crome equals Trump, down to the placement of the "r" and the "m" in their similar names. In the film, Crome maneuvers to gentrify a neighborhood to make himself even richer, with little or no thought to the people who already live there. Until seized upon as a moneymaking opportunity by Crome, this neighborhood for senior citizens and people of color, primarily, has been forgotten and neglected, and even become overrun with rats. Only when there is a possibility of money to made, and a new demographic moved in, does the neighborhood become something of value to men like Crome.

The film's neighborhood is under siege in another way too, not merely by avaricious Crome. In the post-9/11 world, one escape route for the poor denizens of America is to enlist in the Army and fight America's foreign wars, in this case in Iraq. Also, the specter of terrorism in the neighborhood is ever present as TV news stations report "*Terror Alert Raised.*" A character even notes that the War on Terror is actually behind the rat infection spreading through the locality. "*I bet it's Bin Laden, that rat bastard,*" this character states.

Accordingly, *Mulberry Street* is a horror film set in the post-9/11 milieu, one that looks at the ways in which America's domestic problems have been ignored in favor of fighting a war and subsidizing the rich. The poor are fodder to serve those interests. Indeed, the poor folks of Mulberry Street are actually fighting two wars waged by their country, one in Iraq, and one right at home, in their streets. There is no help to be had anywhere, either to save them from Crome or from the vermin invasion carrying a deadly disease.

At the same time that *Mulberry Street* reflects its era, it imagines an eerily real future. The scenes of infection and disease, and the reports of hospitals overrun, eerily presage the era of Coronavirus, quarantine, and panic of 2020. This is a sign, perhaps, that things don't change for the poor of streets like this one. Year after year, they are under siege by malevolent forces and events. In this world, there is no help from the government, law enforcement, or elsewhere. "*Thoughts and prayers*" are offered for the people in the city, as they wonder, "*where is the emergency response?*" or "*What is taking so long for information to trickle out?*" Likely, the bungled response to Hurricane Katrina is one source of this subplot, but in 2020, it is impossible not to think of the Trump Administration's bungled, catastrophic response to Coronavirus, and the needless deaths of more than 250,000 American citizens because of a lack of a coordinated and science-based Federal response to the crisis.

Shot authentically on location, in real apartments and settings, *Mulberry Street* eschews completely, likely by budgetary necessity, the romantic veneer of Hollywood films, and Hollywood horror films. This is not the world of expansive and expensive middleclass neighborhoods, gated communities, and McMansions, where every room is assiduously color coordinated and decorated with expensive pottery and the like.

Since at least the 1990s, Hollywood has been selling that image as the norm of life in America. But films such as *Mulberry Street* remind the viewer that not all Americans live in that world of comfort, affluence and style. Not everyone shares in the wealth. In *Mulberry Street* the canvas is lurid, putrid green, and the central apartment building is falling apart. The sickness or plague in the film, which causes "*sudden aggressive behavior,*" also devolves people, essentially, into human rats. The special effects for this are not exactly great, but the deeper meaning is worth considering.

The film could be noting that the apartment, before upfitted for Crome's exclusive purposes, are breeding grounds for disease, and that the people who live there are not seen as humans; only as vermin to be disinfected. Again, given Trump's rhetoric about people of color throughout the 2016 election and

his Administration, this criticism hardly seems a stretch. Also, it is impossible not to remember the fact that Trump properties, as well as those of his extended family have a history of being rat-infested;^{24/25} a sign of neglect or at least a lack of concern. The makers of the film, with their Trump surrogate, Crome, are not far off the mark. It's almost as if the rats of the film are meant to be a biological weapon, used by the super-rich, to clean out their properties of the poor and the elderly, so they can make greater profits. As a character notes in the film, "It looks like the bad guys win again...."

Mulberry Street never quite manages to be the intense experience of a low-budget effort like classics *Night of the Living Dead* or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. It is not a sense-battering experience, as some horror fans might prefer, or like better. But it is a smart, socially conscious horror film that speaks to its era, and perhaps more importantly, predicts how the American experience can and would grow worse in the ensuing years of the 21st century, as social inequities failed to be addressed by those in power.

The Number 23 * * *

Critical Reception

"Director Joel Schumacher, whose eclectic credits bounce from *Batman Forever* to *The Phantom of the Opera*, renders *The Number 23* in a variety of styles, darkening as he goes, just like the plot. If only the whole thing did not feel like a wrong number."—Hap Erstein, *Palm Beach Post*: "Wrong Number for Carrey 'Number 23' Fails to Add Up...," February 23, 2007, page 6.

"...the final 10 minutes really let down the film. The pay-off to all of the subterfuge and serpentine twists is lunacy worthy of a second-rate soap opera. But still, you'll never look at 23 in quite the same way again."—Rick Fulton, *Daily Record*: "Number's up for Jim," July 27, 2007, page 52.

"For all its gimmicky numerology, *The Number 23* just doesn't add up."—Tom Charity, *CNN.Com*, July 9, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jim Carrey (Walter Sparrow/Fingerling); Virginia Madsen (Agatha Sparrow/Fabrizia); Logan Lerman (Robin Sparrow); Danny Huston (Isaac French/Dr. Miles Phoenix); Lynn Collins (Suicide Blonde/Mrs. Dobkins/Young Fingerling's Mother); Rhona Mitra (Laura Tollins); Michelle Arthur (Sybill); Mark Pelligrino (Kyle Flinch); Paul Butcher (Young Fingerling/Young Walter); David Stifel (Hotel Clerk); Corey Stoll (Sergeant Burns); Ed Lauter (Father Sebastian); Troy Kotsur (Barnaby); Patricia Belcher (Dr. Alice Mortimer); Rudolph Willrich (Dr. Nathaniel); John Fink (Young Walter's Father/Young Fingerlink's Father).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Contrafilm, Firm Films present in association with Kumar Mobilengesellschaft mbH & Co. Projekt Nr. 1 KG, *The Number 23*. Casting: Mali Finn. Production Designer: Andrew Laws. Costume Designer: Daniel Orlandi. Special Effects: Michael Meinardus, Intelligent Creatures Inc. Music: Harry Gregson-Williams. Director of Photography: Matthew Libatique. Film Editing: Mark Stevens. Producers: Beau Flynn, Tripp Vinson. Executive Producers: Richard Brener, Mike Drake, Toby Emmerich, Keith Goldberg, Eli Richbourg, Brooklyn Weaver. Written by: Fernley Phillips. Directed by: Joel Schumacher. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An animal control officer, Walter (Carrey), celebrates a birthday on February 3 (02/03 on the calendar) and his wife, Agatha (Madsen), buys him a strange novel at a used bookstore titled *The Number 23*. Walter becomes obsessed with the book, written by Topsy Kretts, which tells a story of "obsession." The more he reads the book, the more Walter becomes convinced that he is actually the book's protagonist, Detective Fingerling. Fingerling began to lose his mind over connections in his life to the number 23. Now, Walter can't stop seeing the number 23 everywhere, too, and connects that

number to his life. As Walter risks losing everything over his new fixation, he must dig deep into his past to discover his connection to the book.

COMMENTARY: After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in which 3,000 American citizens were murdered in cold blood, the mood and anxieties of the nation changed. Horror movies changed too. Films such as *The Mothman Prophecies* (2003), *The Butterfly Effect* (2004) and this effort, *The Number 23*, explored narratives involving the notion that people possess a pre-ordained destiny, and that dark forces watch over or control that destiny.

Growing in popularity after the 9/11 were books such as Michael Drosmin's *The Bible Code* (1997) and *The Bible Code II* (2002), which suggested all of our history was known and input into the Bible (in code) by extraterrestrials. If we could just interpret the code, we would have known about the Kennedy Assassination, or the fall of the World Trade Center. The new Age of Conspiracies began in earnest, as well, in the 2000s with many "Truthers" suggesting that George W. Bush and a cabal of conservatives had actually either planned and orchestrated the September 11 attacks, or at least let them happen, with foreknowledge, so as to create a New American Empire, but with Middle Eastern oil under its control.

Later in the decade, the Birther Movement grew up, claiming that Barack Obama was a Manchurian Candidate of sorts, a Muslim Agent not really born in America, hoping to move the U.S. to the tenets of Sharia Law. Madness and distrust were in the air, and soon the world had Sandy Hook Truthers, Pizza-Gate, Q-anon, and other dark theories used to help suggest an order in a disordered 21st century.

The Number 23 involves a man named Walter played by Jim Carrey, who falls prey to a conspiracy that comes to dominate every waking moment of his life. It involves the number 23. This is related to real life, and a conspiracy theory known as "*The 23 Enigma*," believed to have first been proposed by author William S. Burroughs. The idea is that the number 23 is unlucky, sinister or malevolent, and that every unfortunate event can be tied to the number 23. The problem, of course, is that people attribute meaning to the number, and start seeing it everywhere. That's what happens to Walter. He discusses in the film how the number of the Devil, 666, is related to the number 23, and how even the date of 9/11/2001 can add up to 23. It's $9+11+2+1$.

Basically, the movie is about conspiracy theories. What is a conspiracy theory? Well, much like a fairy tale or a myth, it is a human attempt to impose a sense of order on a world that is essentially anarchic. It is better to believe, for example, that the Clintons are Satanic child molesters practicing the occult in a popular Washington, D.C., pizzeria than it is to deal with the idea that they are just people whom you dislike or disagree with. Conspiracies are our tricks to make sense out of the world, when the other truths, like random fate, are too simply too difficult to grapple with.

In other words, it is easier to believe that Satan is operating behind the scenes, causing the world's evil, than it is to reckon with the fact that terrible things sometimes happen at random, or that good people might be fallible, and do evil because of human nature. In *The Number 23*, Walter spirals down a rabbit hole of paranoia and despair because he would rather cling to an irrational belief that gives his world a sense of order, than grapple with the idea that there is "no such thing as fate," only "different choices."

In this way, the film also contends with religious belief. There are those who would rather believe in religious text, than science, because science can't confirm belief in a deity. Only religion offers the possibility of a God, and hence a Heaven-like afterlife. So, it is easier and more comforting to believe in the myth than reckon with uncertainty.

The Number 23 is buoyed by a strong performance from Carrey, who is off-kilter and vulnerable enough to sell all the twists and turns, especially those that come in the final act. The great thing about the film is that is paranoid and terrifying throughout but doesn't cheat to get to its end point. The film is stylish and smart, despite the bad reviews it received upon release. In 2007, the movie probably felt strange and unimportant. In the age of Q-anon and the like, it just feels ahead of its time

Critical Reception

"You know there's going to be a claustrophobic, manic parking-garage car chase. Khalfoun doesn't know how to film and edit that. It's as suspenseful as a tortoise race."—Roger Moore, McClatchy—*Tribune News Service*, November 7, 2007, page 1.

"...a serviceable gore-minded thriller..."—James Berardinelli, *Reelviews*, 2007.

"...just like your typical Yuletide get-together, it all falls a little flat."—Anton Bitel, *Eye for Film*, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Rachel Nichols (Angela); Wes Bentley (Thomas); Simon Reynolds (Jim Harper); Philip Akin (Karl); Miranda Edwards (Jody); Paul Sun-Hyung Lee (Man in Elevator); Grace Lynn Kung (Woman in Elevator). Phillip Williams (Cop).

CREW: P2 Productions and Summit Entertainment present *P2*. Casting: Mark Bennett, Robin Cook. Production Designer: Oleg Savitski. Costume Designer: Ruth Secord. Special Effects: Brock Joliffe, Reg Ashby, Geoff Hill, Jamison Scott Goei. Music: Tomanddandy. Director of Photography: Maxime Alexandre. Film Editing: Patrick McMahon. Producers: Alexandre, Aja, Eric Feig. Gregory Levasseur, Patrick Wachsberger. Executive Producers: David Garrett, Bob Hayward, Alix Taylor. Story by: Alexandre Aja, Gregory Levasseur. Written by: Franck Khalfoun, Alexandre Aja, Gregory Levasseur. Directed by: Franck Khalfoun. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A workaholic named Angela (Nichols) is having a bad day. A drunk co-worker named Jim sexually harasses her at the Christmas party, and then she's stuck working late on Christmas Eve. Things go from bad to worse when Angela is the last person to leave the building and discovers that her car won't start. She gets a jump-start from Tom (Wes Bentley), the parking deck security guard, but it doesn't work. He apologizes and she brushes him off. She calls a cab, but the taxi leaves Angela stranded when she can't unlock her building's front gate. Angela soon realizes she is trapped in the parking deck with a very determined serial killer.

COMMENTARY: The creative team behind *High Tension* (2005) and *The Hills Have Eyes* remake (2006) is behind the claustrophobic horror *P2*, a sturdy if uninspired 2007 film set entirely inside a subterranean parking deck in the Big Apple on Christmas Eve. The film's lineage is important here because *P2* is unlikely to spawn the same sort of uneasy, uncertain feelings as either of those other films. It's a good horror show; but ultimately a predictable horror show. *P2* makes good use of the central location, but the effort never rises to the level of mad—or maddening—genius one might associate with its creative team.

The first act of *P2* is nicely constructed to create a burgeoning sense of harried (if not high) tension in the viewer. Angela has an armful of Christmas bags and gifts wherever she goes, and these holiday affectations are like an albatross around the character's neck, dragging her down as she ping-pongs from elevator to lobby to parking deck and back. The audience grows agitated just watching her carry around all that glittery stuff. Her very persona—dragged down by the weight of the gifts—conjures images of the hectic Christmas season. *Rushing*. Family waiting. That sort of thing. The weight she carries makes one think how a lack of time, too much work, and other modern problems have changed the fundamental nature of the holiday season. So, while the audience is thinking about how Angela is going to be late, and how her sister is going to give her shit for it, things get worse *again*. That security man, Tom, is actually a lunatic. He abducts Angela, changes her clothes, puts lipstick on her, and chains her to a table so she'll share Christmas dinner with him and his dog, Rocky. He's even provides her a gift for the occasion: he's tied up co-worker Jim downstairs, on one of the lower parking levels, so the harasser

can “pay” for his transgression.

What follows is a yuletide disemboweling.

The remainder of the film is a concentrated—and very bloody—battle of the wills, not to mention a battle of the sexes, as Angela and Tom compete for the upper hand against the backdrop of the vast, isolating parking deck. Tom is insistent and wants to be Angela’s friend. Angela just wants to escape from the psycho. In charting this very personal combat, *P2* deploys some common tools of the slasher paradigm including such gimmicks as “the car won’t start,” and “the cat/dog jump.” Yet overall this film is more like a serial killer film of 1990s vintage than an old school slasher. What that means, essentially, is that much time is spent here with crazy Tom shouting at Angela and tormenting her with his mealy-mouthed apologies and psychotic desires.

The nice thing about the old school slashers is they don’t talk too much.

Here the loquacious Tom finds time to tell Angela how lonely he is; ask Angela why they can’t be friends, and he even performs a little Elvis number to the tune of “Blue Christmas.” Bentley pulls off the role but talking psychos are a dime a dozen, and Tom doesn’t really stand out from the nasty pack. He’s anti-social, but tiresome. He’s an irritant, but ultimately more pitiable than frightening. Watching this delicate interpersonal ballet of violence, one may come to realize that what *P2* was truly missing is a more fully developed subtext. For instance, think about how Angela is a professional, upwardly mobile businessperson and how Thomas ... *isn’t*. Like your average incel, he probably feels resentment that she is such a success. That kind of resentment might explain his repeated attempts at domination. and lands this film in the “toxic masculinity” sub-genre of the decade (alongside *What Lies Beneath*, *Gothika*, *Hard Candy*, etc.). But there’s much less of that type psychology in the film than there should be. *P2* is a competent exercise in horror techniques, but not a very deep or meaningful one.

Still, there’s ingenuity on display here. There’s a great scene involving an elevator, Angela and a fire hose, for instance. It goes in a direction you likely haven’t seen before. The ending is also pretty strong visually: a snow-bound cleansing and ascent from concrete underworld into welcoming daylight. Bottom line: the movie is enjoyable as an experience but not strong enough to earn the distinction of being a great genre film. You’ve seen all the elements of *P2* before. My recommendation is that you see *High Tension* again instead, because love it or hate it, it makes you think. *P2* is a horror movie that is fine while it lasts but will never trouble your sleep.

*The Poughkeepsie Tapes (DTV) * * **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Stacy Chbosky (Cheryl Dempsey); Ben Messmer (Edward Carver); Samantha Robson (Samantha); Ivar Brogger (Leonard Schway); Lou George (Felton Lewis); Amy Lyndon (Alice Endrisart); Michael Lawson (Simmon Alray); Ron Harper (Mike Moakes); Kim Kenny (Pam Frears); Iris Bahr (Aretha Creely); Scott Breehner (Jason Ribling); Kelli Bielema (Jane Gerber); Linda Bisesti (Sandra Willetts); Lisa Black (Victoria Dempsey).

CREW: M.G.M. Presents a Brothers Dowdle Production, *The Poughkeepsie Tapes*. Casting: Dustin Cole Blackburn. Production Designer: Alethea Root. Costume Designer: Annie Bloom. Music: Keefus Clancia. Director of Photography: Shawn Dufraine. Film Editors: John Erick Dowdle, Elliot Greenberg. Producer: Drew Dowdle. Executive Producers: Drew Dowdle, Stephen Chbosky, Michael Zoumas, Patrick Lussier, Ward Bennett. Written and Directed by: John Erick Dowdle. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 81 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Federal agents recount to a documentary film crew the story of a serial killer in Poughkeepsie whose work—found on several hundred videotapes—has been collected, analyzed and puzzled over to no good outcome. The diabolical killer, a self-described “*butcher*,” has been murdering victims since 1993, but also abducts some women and keeps them as slaves. One such victim is Cheryl

Dempsey (Chbosky), whom he calls “Slave,” and keeps in a sex dungeon. The police recount the capture of a man they believe to be the murderer, but questions remain. After years, the killer is not definitively found, having “*moved somewhere else*,” but the police do not give up. In fact, they suspect he will attend the premiere of the documentary.

COMMENTARY: *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* is a creepy and effective combination of two 2000s horror genres: found footage, and torture porn. The third genre it plumbs from, of course, is the serial killer cinema. The film is assembled from “A” roll of interviews with law enforcement officials and people involved with the case of a diabolical serial killer, while the “B” roll comes from that serial killer’s extensive VHS collection that he knowingly left behind for the police to locate, and pore over.

In short, the movie finds a new way to make tropes about a cinematic monster, the serial killer, feel fresh and new. This freshness originates not from the narrative, which concerns the tired trope of a murderer who is a game player, and taunts and tricks the (hapless) police, but from the visualization of the story through the found footage perspective. The movie succeeds, to use Roger Ebert’s phrase, not because what it is about, because of how it happens to be about that subject. The film’s visual approach reflects the thematic idea of a puzzle that has so many pieces, some seemingly contradictory, that they can’t all be assembled to paint an accurate picture of a psychopath, let alone apprehend him.

The film’s murderer works in the 1990s, using by what is, in the 2000s, becoming an archaic technology: video tapes. The footage of the killer’s work looks accurate to the era it depicts and reinforces the idea of the tapes as something akin to what one of the investigators calls “homemade” porno. The intentionally unprofessional, dated look of the killer’s tapes add an element of realism and therefore danger to the action that gives *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* much of its power. The “unprofessional” nature of the footage makes an audience fear that the film will tread to places it will be afraid to follow; that it will see things that wouldn’t be seen in a more conventional Hollywood film.

This is precisely an environment in which the horror genre can flourish, and *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* does just that. Although the interviews with the police and agents feel stilted by comparison, some moments on the tapes prove genuinely disturbing, and reflect the era of *Saw* and torture porn. *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* often feels real, but if it has any detriment, it is that occasionally it also plays like a TV special on the History Channel, a sensationalistic “trumped up” drama made to titillate, not necessarily tell a believable or consistent story. But after 9/11, a tragedy with some contradictory and confusing explanations itself, the idea of a story as a singular, consistent thing was in question in American filmmaking.

One of the most intriguing aspects of *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* is its treatment, and indeed, critique, of American infrastructure and bureaucracy at the turn of the century, and afterwards, at the start of the 21st century. In part, the killer thrives because he understands bureaucracy and biases implicit in the country, and in particular, in law enforcement. For instance, he chops up the bodies of some victims, and leaves parts in different counties. Because the same corpse is “discovered” in different municipalities, there is a turf war over investigation. Whose case is it? The killer’s modus operandi thus paralyzes or at least slows down the investigation. Law enforcement is suddenly no longer about catching a criminal, but about who gets credit, or blame. It’s about whose case it really is.

The same issue is raised on a national level in the film. A man is cleared of being the murderer, but he is exonerated immediately after the 9/11 attacks. As one of the investigators reports, “*Then 9/11 happened and no one gave a shit about anything else*.” Again, a bureaucracy fails, this time on a larger level, because it can’t do two things at once. The question raised about the serial killer in the film is, simply the following: is he such a genius that he can’t be caught, or does he fall between the cracks of law enforcement because America’s establishment no longer functions as it should; for the victims; for the safety of the people?

The killer’s nature as a manipulator is also evident in his treatment of Cheryl, his slave. He completely breaks her down so that, after she is found alive and freed by the authorities, she commits suicide. Her months of captivity have made her inextricably and emotionally linked to her captor. Again,

wouldn't law enforcement expect this? Wouldn't she be helped more? Watched?

The inescapable conclusion of *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* is that the killer's playground is our culture, and our failed infrastructure. The system can't even save a victim that was "rescued." No real concern is given to Cheryl's psychology, her PTSD, or state of mind. The state's responsibility to help her seems to stop when she is out of the killer's physical grasp.

But, of course, she is never out of his control, or psychological grasp.

The Poughkeepsie Tapes is organized into seven parts, or vignettes, each separated by a title, such as "The Tapes," "First Blood," "Getting Better," "Cheryl Dempsey," "Found," and so forth. These section breaks in the film give it an overriding structure and organization that the disorganization and chaos of the tapes don't. Each section reveals a different piece of the puzzle, so that audiences can form a picture of the killer and his escapades. The film also ends with a great rhetorical flourish, and one that seems to pay homage to horror movie history. In particular, as the film ends, the investigator suggests that the killer, because of his vanity and ego, will attend the premiere of the documentary. In other words, he will go to the theater and see the movie. And, of course, audiences are watching this movie right now, which means they may be sitting in the auditorium next to the very killer the movie features. This makes the killer's reign of terror all the more personal, immediate, and terrifying. And it reflects a similar film, *The Town that Dreaded Sundown* (1976), which also featured a killer who was never caught; and whom a movie was made about.

The Poughkeepsie Tapes is thus a near-perfect synthesis of 2000-era horror movies, with the gore of torture porn, the style of found footage, a serial killer monster, and the self-reflexive "meta" awareness of a neo slasher film (for instance, *Cherry Falls*, or *Scream 3*). Admittedly, the self-reflexive aspect never had the chance to succeed as much as it could have, since *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* never was afforded the wide release it deserved. Instead, it became an obscure classic, appearing sometimes on YouTube and in bootleg form. Ironically, those less-than-ideal distribution venues only further the sense of the film's dangerous nature. *The Poughkeepsie Tapes*, seen in the wrong aspect, or in grainy copy, feels like a movie so scary, so dangerous, it cannot be seen in the mainstream. In 2017, the film officially came to streaming services ten years after its intended release.

It was worth the wait.

Primeval * * *

Critical Reception

"First-time feature director Michael Katleman cheats like mad, attempting to hide ridiculous action and mediocre CGI amid choppy editing and murky night scenes. It's just a bad movie all the way around. Meanwhile, any stab at a humanitarian political statement succumbs to lurid violence and gore."—Bob Smithouser, *Plugged In*, 2007, last retrieved November 8, 2020.

"As a Creature Feature, this movie was just terrible. Everything about the giant crocodile was wrong ... it roared like a lion (or like the T-Rex from *Jurassic Park*), it was able to run (yes, RUN) great distances over land at incredible speeds and to top it all off, it was super intelligent..."—Robert Haines, Seattle PI, January 18, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Dominic Purcell (Tim Manfrey); Brooke Langton (Aviva Masters); Orlando Jones (Steve Johnson); Jurgen Prochnow (Jacob Krieg); Gideon Emery (Matt Collins); Garbiel Malema (Jojo); Linda Mpondo (Gold Tooth); Lehlohonolo Makoko (Beanpole); Dumisani Mbebe (Harry); Chris April (Captain); Ernest Ndhlovu (Shaman);

CREW: Buena Vista Pictures Hollywood Pictures, Pariah, and Sarah James Productions present *Primeval*. Casting: John Papsidera. Costume Designer: Diana Cilliers. Production Designer: Johnny Breedt. Special

Effects: Luma Pictures, KNB EFX Group. Music: John Frizzell. Director of Photography: Edward J. Pei. Film Editor: Gabriel Wyre. Producer: Gavin Polone. Executive Producers: Mitch Engel, James Tarses. Written by: John Brancato, Michael Ferris. Directed by: Michael Katleman. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A giant, century-old, man-eating crocodile named Gustave prowls the rivers and swamps of Burundi in Central Africa, near Rwanda. Gustave is 30 feet long and likes to dine on human blood. After the brutal death of a British animal lover via Gustave's "jaws," a TV news station sends a scandal-plagued news producer, Tim (Purcell); a producer named Aviva (Langton); a cameraman, Steven (Jones); a "great white hunter type" named Krieg (Prochnow); and a *Crocodile Hunter* rip-off, Matt (Emery) to capture the animal alive "in time for sweeps." Once in Burundi, the team is joined by a little dog named Wiley that natives have been using as Gustave-bait, and a boy who wants to go to America, named JoJo. With the assistance of locals, the team deploys a steel cage to trap the giant croc, but carnage ensues. Not just from an animal with a taste for human flesh, but from the murderous local thugs, led by a dictator named "Little Gustave."

COMMENTARY: *Primeval* is a high-energy horror film about a killer crocodile and a decent genre effort of the "revenge of nature" variety popularized in the 1970s. The film is aggressively mean and lean and wastes no breath on anything not immediately intrinsic to the narrative and the gore. The movie moves at such a hectic, fast clip that it slides more exposition by the viewer in the first 18 minutes than most movies can in 45.

This isn't a virtue in and of itself save that *Primeval* starts, gets the bloody job done, and then rolls end credits before there is time to tire of it. *Primeval* knows precisely why it exists, and the breakneck pace results in some fun action set-pieces. There's one in particular that is worthy of mention. It occurs in the middle of the movie as the local thugs armed with rocket launchers and machine guns chase down the survivors of a croc attack in a swamp. The baddies pursue the protagonists in a range rover, and the heroes are literally stuck between a rock and a hard place. The audience has been informed that Gustave is hiding somewhere nearby, in the high grass, but it's either face the monster's slavering, snapping jaws, or get blasted by bullets, and the scene escalates until the shock and awe really pays off. There's also an explosive moment involving an ejection from the Range Rover and an impact with a tree, explosions galore, a confrontation in the mud with a machete, a desperate race to get two bullets and a shotgun into one pair of hands, and all the while the looming threat of Gustave grows. This is a sustained, glorious bit of action and it is not merely powerfully edited and framed, but actually exhilarating.

In terms of other virtues, the film features some lovely natural photography. These shots are well-composed. There are some great aerial views, for instance, of the team and the supportive locals carrying the giant steel cage across the land to the water. And horror films will welcome the multiple crocodile P.O.V. shots from water's edge. Again, *Primeval* is more deftly shot and edited than it has any right or responsibility to be.

Finally, the dialogue is sharp, and the humor emerges from the fact that the filmmakers know movie history, and realize it is part of an established genre. *Primeval* features self-reflexive references to *Jaws* (1975) and *When Animals Attack*. But more importantly than such throwaways is the fact that *Primeval* carefully and assiduously adheres to the central axiom of the "Revenge of Nature" films: it is never the animal's fault that it kills people. No, it's always man's fault. Pollution causes the frogs to go nuts in *Frogs*. The spraying of pesticides (from a crop duster) causes spiders to grow aggressive in *Kingdom of the Spiders*. A hole in the ozone caused by overuse of hairspray makes animals attack in William Girdler's classic, *Day of the Animals* (1977). It's the same here. All the bloodshed caused by Little Gustave has literally gone "downstream." The corpses generated in the political bloodbath have been dumped in the water and become Gustave's primary food source. That's why he's developed a taste for human blood: because *we* like to spill human blood. Some critics have called *Primeval* a variation of

Anaconda and *Hotel Rwanda* and that description makes sense.

Given the comparison, perhaps one might even argue that there is a higher aesthetic or moral purpose to *Primeval*; a social commentary beyond the blood and guts. It's not just that violence in man has caused violence towards man in nature, but more than that. *Primeval* is a culture clash between glib, self-interested Americans and the people of Africa, who are clearly involved in a life-or-death struggle. Our "heroes" are there for ratings, for a stunt. The people who live there are just trying to survive, or escape. There's an interesting conversation in the film regarding the news people and whether or not they should even report on the political strife occurring in Burundi, Darfur, Rwanda and even Katrina are all referred to. Thus, this "dumb" killer crocodile movie boasts a heart and a brain.

Now, don't let this reviewer send you down the garden path. Some of the Gustave CGI is dodgy, and the main characters, too, are about as dimensional as cardboard. But ultimately those considerations secondary to the film's sense of dangerous energy, the over-the-top gore, the ridiculous sense of humor, and the thrilling action scenes.

Again, this is a modest, cheap B-movie, but it is unpretentious, action-packed fun.

Pumpkinhead: Blood Feud (DTV) * 1/2

Cast & Crew

CAST: Lance Henriksen (Ed Harley); Lynne Verrall (Haggis); Amy Manson (Jodie Hatfield); Bradley Taylor (Ricky McCoy); Claire Lams (Dolly Hatfield); Rob Freeman (Sheriff Dallas Pope); Ovidiu Niculescu (Bobby Joe Hatfield); Peter Barnes (Papa McCoy); Elvin Dandel (Tristan McCoy); Richard Durden (Old Man Hatfield).

CREW: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, Motion Picture Corporation of America, Lost Junction Films present *Pumpkinhead: Blood Feud*. Casting: Carolyn McLeod. Music: Rob Lord. Costume Designer: Ioana Alboiu. Special Make-up Effects: Garry J. Tunncliffe. Production Designer: Cristi Niculescu. Director of Photography: Erik Alexander Wilson. Executive Producers: Karri O'Reilly, Reuben Liber. Producers: Donald Kushner, Pierre Spengler, Brad Kevroy. Written and Directed by: Mike Hurst. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: As the Hatfields and McCoys continue their long-standing feud, the spirit of Ed Harley (Henriksen) appears to warn the combatants about the danger of summoning the demon Pumpkinhead and contending with the witch, Haggis (Verrall).

COMMENTARY: The *Pumpkinhead* franchise continues to circle the drain in this disappointing direct-to-video sequel that features a scaled-down demon costume and returns Lance Henriksen to the action. The inspiration for *Blood Feud* is clearly not merely the infamous Hatfield/McCoy rivalry, but Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, as two houses, or two families, go to war, and in this case, the weapon of mass destruction is Pumpkinhead himself. Viewers will be tempted to declare "*a pox on both their houses*," since the sequel has been produced not in Appalachia, the South, or any other American region, but in cost-saving Bucharest, Romania. Everything feels just a bit off, accordingly, despite the ubiquitous American flags.

Most of the cast simply grapples to sound authentically American, let alone Southern.

Also, the great Lance Henriksen appears here, as if piped in from another movie. Henriksen almost never appears on set with the other cast-members. Instead, he is featured in separate shots on the same sets, as though he were simply ported into the proceedings either before or after principal photography. It is a testament to his humanity and acting chops that his performance as Ed Harley still possesses gravitas, despite the generic nature of his dialogue.

Henriksen makes the most out of dreadfully vanilla lines such as "*something terrible is happening*,

and only you can stop it," or "We are what we do." Henriksen forged an indelible connection with viewers in the 1989 original film, and that connection lingers here in this low-rent sequel, even though he has little meaningful to do. In the scenes wherein Harley talks about the loss of his son, in particular, Henriksen brings a humanity to the proceedings that is otherwise missing from the tale of star-crossed lovers. Harley notes, for instance, that he is trapped "between" worlds for all time and can't even see his beloved son. That eternal separation is the terrible price he pays for having summoned the evil Pumpkinhead.

For fans of the original, this performance and lines like this one will momentarily resonate. Not so successfully, the film also sets up Haggis and Ed as sort of cosmic debaters, or opposites: one arguing for the use of Pumpkinhead to solve worldly feuds, the other arguing against the demon's (inevitable) resurrection.

At times, Henriksen also appears green-screened into shots, and the effect is all-too-obvious. But this movie's effects are nothing to write home about in several aspects, actually. The costume for *Pumpkinhead* looks cheap and lumpy, and occasionally bad CGI is utilized for the action scenes. Near the start of the movie a CGI Pumpkinhead decapitates a biker for instance, and it looks ridiculous.

During *Blood Feud*, a character is warned that "revenge will eat at" his soul, "bit by bit."

Lousy direct-to-video sequels manage to do the same thing to the legacy of the brilliant original *Pumpkinhead*, even when a genre great like Henriksen is on board.

The Rage (DTV) No Stars

Cast & Crew

CAST: Andrew Divoff (Dr. Viktor Vasilienko); Erin Brown (Kat); Ryan Hooks (Josh); Sean Serino (Pris); Rachel Scheer (Olivia); Anthony Clark (Jay); Christopher Nelson (Larry); Reggie Bannister (Uncle Ben); Angela Gasperec (Cheating Girl); Matt Jerrams (The Commander); Alan Tuskes (Gor); Jillian McLaughlin (Shelly); Charles Price (Gooley); Sean Rodges (Gimp Cage Freak); Carl Hunnell (Squib Head Freak); Louie Kurtzman (Louie); Sadie Kurtzman (Sadie); John Grabach (Teenage Victor); Connor Kurtzman (Young Viktor).

CREW: Precinct 13 Entertainment Presents *The Rage*. Casting: Mark Sikes. Production Designer: John Bisson. Costume Designer: Connie Caldwell. Special Effects: Connie Cadwell, Brian Demski, Bryan Jones, Kaitlin Miller, Ulysses Argetta. Music: Edward Douglas, Midnight Syndicate. Director of Photography: Robert Kurtzman. Film Editing: Andrew Sagar. Producers: John Bisson, Matt Jerrams, Anne Kurtzman, Robert Kurtzman. Executive Producers: Amber Bissman, Ben Bissman, David Campbell, Marilyn Campbell, Marvin Campbell, Sandra Campbell, Kelly Kurtzman, Steve Kurtzman, Michael Moyer, Joyce Murphy, Patrick Murphy, Moe Ratliff, Randy Ratliff, Stacy Ratliff. Story: Robert Kurtzman and John Bisson. Written by: John Bisson. Directed by: Robert Kurtzman. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Dr. Vasilienko (Divoff), the world's leading biological engineer, discovered the cure for cancer, and wanted to share it with the world. Instead his research was confiscated by the United States and he was condemned to an insane asylum. Now, Dr. Vasilienko is free and he conducts terrifying experiments from a shack in the woods. One day, he develops a "rage mutagen" that can infect the world, and a carrier escapes into the woods. The mutagen infects local wildlife, including vultures, and a group of partying teenagers are attacked, hunted, and eventually captured by the mad scientist.

COMMENTARY: "We could all be dead tomorrow, let's live," a character notes in Robert Kurtzman's geek show, *The Rage*, and that's really good advice. We could all be dead tomorrow, so avoid this movie at all costs, and live your life in blissful ignorance that it actually exists.

Kurtzman is one of the greatest make-up artists in Hollywood and he directed the not-bad *Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster* (1997). Thus, the embarrassing quality of *The Rage* is baffling. This movie

features bad acting and effects. Worse, it is excessively loud with constant screaming and over-emoting, a headache-inducing din that is periodically interrupted for excessive gore.

While it is intriguing that “rage” is again a monster of the 2000s (see the vastly superior *28 Days Later*), virtually nothing is done with that idea. It’s the film’s title, but thematically nothing more than a background detail. And heck, there may even be a critique of America here, given the way a good for mankind (the cure for cancer) is hidden away to benefit the few, and the rich, rather than the many. The mad scientist observes, for example, that the capitalist system deserves death. But again, as the late Roger Ebert would no doubt remind his readers at this juncture, it’s not what a movie is about that matters, but *how* it is about that subject. *The Rage* wallows in stupidity and poor production quality, and even makes a half-hearted attempt to be “self-aware.”

With Kurtzman at the helm, one at least has the right to expect competent special effects. But that is not the case. The mutant vultures in the film are practical in close-ups and look okay there, but are depicted with terrible CGI in the wide or distant shots. This CGI is *Birdemic* (2012)-like in its awfulness. Even basic effects, like the backgrounds in driving scenes are botched with terrible green screen, and it is not clear why. An RV trailer crash for instance, is not done live, apparently, but with digital effects and green screen, and all the scale and perspective seem off in the scene. At the end, the mad scientist’s lab goes up in CGI flames, and it too, looks terrible and utterly unreal.

The characters infected in the film are described as having “rage coursing” through their “veins,” and viewers may feel the same way after witnessing the film’s treatment of genre great Reggie Bannister. He shows up for a cameo as an uncle taking two kids on a fishing trip. Before he gets infected with rage, he mentions the video game, *Phantasm*, just so we remember who he is and get a plug in for that franchise. This attempt at post-modern self-awareness is mimicked in dialogue such as “*I’ve seen a hundred shitty horror movies that start like this,*” but that this quality doesn’t do the movie any favors. *The Rage* does not compare favorably to a hundred other shitty horror movies. Instead, it’s at the bottom of the heap.

The Rage, meet Mr. Jingles.

Perhaps the film was supposed to be funny, but just missed that mark by a country mile? The effects are so bloody and intense (with exposed brains, and so forth), and the soundtrack is so loud and coarse that the film is the opposite of light and humorous. It is oppressive and dark. The monsters in the lab are ugly and hideous, and their mutations are grotesque, again not funny. *The Rage* is just such an unpleasant experience to watch, so much so that it makes one lose faith in humanity, especially given the pedigree of its director.

“*Why are you doing this to us?*” a trapped character asks desperately of Dr. Vasilenko in the film, and the sentiment is consistent with the movie.

Why, *The Rage*, why?

The Reaping ★ ★

Critical Reception

“*The Reaping* treads its bloody water for a good long while, with murky cinematography and heavy-handed sound effects—a whistling kettle sounds like a speeding locomotive, and a kitchen door slams shut like the gates of hell itself. Meanwhile, director Stephen Hopkins indulges in many gotcha! moments that really don’t add anything to the story.”—Matt Soergel, *Florida Times Union*, April 6, 2007, page WE-7.

“Only some striking special effects make this sorry addition to the *Exorcist/Omen* school of religious horror worth watching.”—Alan Morrison, *Daily Record*, April 20, 2007, page 47.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Hilary Swank (Katherine); David Morrissey (Doug); Idris Elba (Ben); Anna Sophia Robb (Loren McConnell); Stephen Rea (Father Costigan); William Ragsdale (Sheriff Cade); John McConnell (Mayor Brooks); David Jensen (Jim Wakeman); Yvonne Landry (Brynn Wakeman); Samuel Garland (William Wakeman); Myles Cleveland (Kyle Wakeman); Andrea Frankle (Maddie McConnell); Mark Lynch (Brody McConnell); Stuart Greer (Gordon); Lara Grice (Isabelle); Cody Sanders (Hank); Burgess Jenkins (David Winter); Jillian Batherson (Janet); Karen Yum (Nun); Afemo Omilami (Haman).

CREW: Warner Bros., Dark Castle Entertainment, Chime Productions LLC, Eyetronic and Village Roadshow Pictures present *The Reaping*. Casting: Lora Kennedy. Production Designer: Graham Walker. Costume Designer: Jeffrey Kurland. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Howard Berger, Greg Nicotero, CIS Hollywood. Music: John Frizzell. Director of Photography: Peter Levy. Film Editing: Colby Parker. Jr. Producers: Susan Downey, Herbert W. Gains, Joel Silver, Robert Zemeckis. Executive Producers: Bruce Berman, Erik Olsen, Steve Richards. Story by: Brian Rousso. Written by: Carey W. Hayes, Chad Hayes. Directed by: Stephen Hopkins. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A scientist and former minister, Dr. Katherine Winter (Swank), travels the world solving scientific puzzles that indigenous peoples interpret as Biblical plagues. Upon return from one such trip, Dr. Winter is approached by the townspeople of Haven in Louisiana. The locals there believe that a bewitched, outcast girl is responsible for the local river turning blood red. Dr. Winter investigates but learns that she herself is part of the unearthly mystery.

COMMENTARY: In the tradition of *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Omen* (1976) and *The Seventh Sign* (1988) comes *The Reaping* (2007), a religious-themed horror flick directed by Stephen Hopkins of *Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child* (1989) and *Predator 2* (1990) fame. Oscar-winner Hilary Swank stars as LSU professor Katherine Winter, a learned woman who debunks incidences of Biblical “plagues” for a living and finds special pleasure in “*disproving miracles*.” If you’ve seen any religious horror movies before this one, you likely know exactly where this is one is headed from the first frame. The lead character, who puts her faith in knowledge, facts, and science comes around, in the film’s last act, to accepting religion and faith in God.

Ugh.

This author always wonders why it can’t be the other way around.

Why can’t—just once—religious people come to the conclusion that they are the ones who have been deluded, and begin to accept fact and science, instead in a horror movie? Why not a horror movie with that challenging topic as its central premise?

Additionally, one simply must wonder about the pop culture films of the 2000s. If they weren’t so many films like this one, so aggressively anti-science and pro-“faith,” would America still find itself in

the degraded intellectual state it faces in the 2020s, with flat-earthers, anti-vaxxers, climate-change deniers and others in high office who believe in defiance of facts and the fossil record that the Earth is only 6000 years old? Even with a pandemic going on, and an easy method of protecting oneself to exposure—wearing a face mask—some people still refuse to accept science. Instead, these people gather without masks, and believe that God will protect them.

Good luck with that.

From this rant, you can probably guess, *The Reaping* is a religious horror film whose only point is to dismiss science and affirm self-righteous “belief,” including the belief in Divine Intervention, and the Devil Him-self.

But, to slow down and not be extreme, there is nothing wrong with spiritual belief, or an acknowledgment of the mysteries of life. Rather, it is that *The Reaping* is so one-sided, familiar, and aggressive in pushing its particular religious agenda.

After solving a case in Concepción, Chile (a location portrayed by terrible CGI), a triumphant Winter returns to the States and at the behest of a local high-school science teacher (David Morrissey) agrees to assist a remote Southern town called Haven with a problem. It seems that the idyllic, off-the-radar town is undergoing a plague of its own, a local bayou turned blood-red, and the superstitious townsfolk blame a shunned twelve-year-old girl on welfare for the curse.

This strikes a chord with Katherine, because her young daughter was murdered on a missionary trip to Africa. In fact, it was that incident that caused Katherine—formerly a Christian—to lose faith. On arrival in Haven (*motto: What you waiting for? God don't have all day!*), Katherine suspects Pfisteria as the cause of the bayou's crimson hue. However, before long, other Biblical plagues are visited upon the town. Particularly (and in chronological order): raining frogs, the death of livestock, an outbreak of boils, and an attack by locusts.

Katherine is hard-pressed to explain this series of catastrophic events, but the locals suspect that “*there's something unnatural going on.*” Thus Katherine, a disbeliever who has “lost faith” because of a personal tragedy in her past, is forced to reckon with and re-evaluate her religious beliefs in the face of mounting evidence of the supernatural (and **THE PRESENCE OF GOD!**). And the tale of an “evil little girl” (like Samara in *The Ring* [2002]) is actually a smokescreen for a story about the primacy of the maternal instinct and motherhood. During the climax, there's much sound and fury as God's wrath is visited upon the Evil Doers in Haven, like the shock and awe dispensed in Baghdad at the start of the invasion of Iraq. The Evil Doers in this case—spoiler alert—turn out to be ensconced in a Satanist cult. And they have a most unusual eugenics program going on.

So, basically, *The Reaping* is a southern-fried *Brotherhood of Satan* (1971).

Just not that good.

The film's best scene involves Katherine, providing in a well-delivered monologue, a detailed scientific explanation for the ten plagues visited upon Egypt in pre-history according to the Bible. It's a brilliant recitation of scientific hypothesis, and absolutely believable and plausible to the final iteration. And yet, even in this strong scene, the author felt a little let down.

Why? Gillian Anderson would have delivered it better.

Seriously, this moment plays like a decent *X-Files* monologue from Scully. The only problem is that *The X-Files* dealt with this brand of material every week for years and years and did it so much better. Again, there are many Americans of genuine faith and religious belief, and *The X-Files* contended with that in a smart and respectful way. On the series, there was always a yin-and-yang, between belief and skepticism, on a whole range of topics, including religion. Here, there is no such counterbalance. And when Swank delivers the speech, it's a petulant regurgitation of fact. She is smart, and accurate, but the movie wants us to dislike her, for her “arrogance” believing that she could—*horrors!*—use science to determine the truth of the world around her.

On a script level, *The Reaping* doesn't really play fair with the viewer either. Throughout the film, Katherine experiences nightmares which might be real, and “dazzling” psychic visions or flashes of events she couldn't have possibly witnessed firsthand, but which, in an obligatory, expository fashion, provide her critical information at just the right time to solve the puzzle of the plagues. The issue,

however, is that the script doesn't include Katherine's reaction to these all-too-frequent psychic interludes.

One hallucination finds her walking out on a front porch, walking to an outdoor sink, grabbing a rag, and washing up a little girl's menstrual blood from the child's leg. Then the girl disappears as though she was never really there. Katherine is still holding the rag and standing on the porch. So, does Katherine think she imagined this moment? Does she think she saw a ghost? Was it real to her? Was it a fantasy? The movie never decides how the character views these flashes (which I suspect were added later, probably after a test screening, in an attempt to salvage some sense of clarity). She just walks back into the house and with seemingly no reaction. In this situation, especially if I were a rational debunker for a living, I'd say ... *okay, I'm still holding the rag. There's blood on it. Therefore, I did not hallucinate this encounter. What's going on?*

Regardless, here's how you can tell that the movie never decides what Katherine thinks she sees during these psychic flashes. After the event with the menstrual blood, Katherine gets on the phone with her token black sidekick, played by Idris Elba, and he asks her about what she saw at the house. She instantly changes the subject instead of answering: a blatant cop-out. That's not playing fair with the audience. She doesn't even say. "*I'm not sure,*" or "*I think I'm seeing things.*" She just blithely changes the subject, ignoring his question.

Wouldn't you mention to your colleague and friend that something strange just happened to you? Well, only, I suppose, if that strange event was in the original script and not added in post.

There are some other notable gaps in logic. One of Katherine's long-distance friends is a priest, played by a slumming-it Stephen Rea. He is receiving "signs" (from God or the Devil) that Katherine is in danger. The priest speaks with her on the telephone and warns her—in a long dialogue scene—about a Biblical prophecy which she may be playing a role in as an ordained minister herself. He gets out a long-winded bit of exposition, highly detailed and informative, but then—after he finishes—his office catches fire and he burns to death while Katherine is still on the phone.

From this sequence of events, we can intuit that the Devil is so powerful he can spontaneously burn up a priest's office and a priest, himself, long-distance (ostensibly from Hell). So why didn't he do that *before* the priest delivered the critical exposition to Katherine, the one person who might stop the Devil's master plan?

Once one begins thinking clearly about the details of this film's narrative, the whole thing just falls apart.

Most of *The Reaping* plays at that level of just-a-little-too-stupid-to-be-good, riffing derivatively on *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) for its "surprise" ending. There are occasional moments of legitimate visual ingenuity, such as a "locust cam," however. Locusts swarm onto the camera lens for a few seconds, and the viewer can't make out what's happening, only witness the crawling bugs moving around.

That's a fun touch. But otherwise, The Reaping panders just a little bit too much to religious belief, and therefore preaches to the choir.

At the box office, it appropriately reaped what it sowed.

REC ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"*REC* is an effective reality horror entry which plays with all the usual reality horror subgenre conventions.... In this case the conceit of the camera having to be always on is strong, even if by the end it begins to stretch credulity, but by that point the engaged viewer should no longer be nitpicking."—Donato Totaro, *Offscreen*, October 2008.

"*REC* is one of the best zombie (or rather, pseudo-zombie) movies I've seen in years, a genuinely claustrophobic viewing experience in which the use of shaky-cam footage truly adds to the tension in a way

that ultimately outclasses even *Cloverfield*. At just under 80 minutes, the taut running time and rapid pace mean that, despite the fairly familiar opening scenes, the film never becomes tedious, unlike the meandering *Diary of the Dead*.”—Bernice M. Murphy, *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, June 8, 2008, pages 96–101.

“While most cinematic genres are languishing, the horror movie is alive and well and holidaying in the Spanish sun. Following two weeks after *The Orphanage*, Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza’s *REC* is guaranteed to scare the pantalones off you.”—Philip French, *The Guardian*, April 12, 2008.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Manuela Velasco (Ángela); Ferran Terraza (Manu); Jorge-Yamam Serrano (Policía joven); Pablo Rosso (Pablo); David Vert (Álex); Vincent Gil (Policía Adulto); Martha Caronbell (Izquierdo); Maria Teresa Ortega (Abuela); Manuel Bronchud (Abuelo); Akemi Goto (Japonesa); Kao Chen-Mín (Japonés); Maria Lanau (Madre histérica); Claudia Silva (Jennifer); Carlos Lasarte (César); Javie Boter (Nina Medeiros); Ben Temple (Medico).

CREW: Sony Pictures Entertainment, Castelao Productions, and Filmax present *REC*. Casting: Cristina Campos. Costume Designer: Gloria Viguer Zabala. Production Designer: Gemma Fauria. Director of Photography: Pablo Rosso. Film Editor: David Gallart. Producer: Julio Fernandez. Executive Producer: Carlos Fernandez. Written by: Jaume Balagueró, Luiso Berejo, Paco Plaza. Directed by: Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 78 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Barcelona, a reporter, Ángela (Velasco), and her cameraman, Pablo, visit a local fire station for a segment on their series “While You’re Asleep.” At first, all appears normal as Ángela explains, before the camera, the routine of the night shift at the fire station. But then, Ángela and Pablo join the firemen on an emergency call to a local apartment building. There, she and the others discover that a terrifying plague of madness that resembles rabies is running loose among the denizens. The situation spirals out of control, and before long, the local government has quarantined the building, trapping Ángela, Pablo, the firemen and the infected inside. The source of the infection is traced to a top floor apartment, which belonged to a Catholic priest. As Ángela explores that dark apartment, she learns she is not alone inside it. Something from the attic still lives and prowls the premises.

COMMENTARY: Fending off all-comers in its burgeoning sub-genre, *REC* just may be the best and most harrowing found footage horror movie ever made. And that is certainly a big statement, considering the quality of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), which was this author’s selection for the best horror film of the 1990s. *REC* is relentless, inventive, and completely immersive. It feels real to an alarming degree.

Like other films of the found footage variety, *REC* is shot entirely from the viewpoint of a cameraman. A sometimes shaky, sometimes steady “eye” navigates the film’s claustrophobic, terrifying world, and important events are often half-glimpsed, or occur entirely off camera. Transitions occur simply, when the camera is de-activated. When re-activated, the audience suddenly finds itself in a new scene, in a fresh location, and reckoning with the idea the situation has grown decidedly worse.

Sometimes, the camera is positioned in the back of a long line of people, peering over shoulders and heads, and trying desperately to make sense of the terrain and the chaotic situation. This helter-skelter, news-footage-style visual approach heightens and accelerates suspense to a fever pitch and matches in style and terror some of the news footage shot during such 2000s disasters as the 9/11 attacks, or the invasion of Baghdad in 2003.

This is all possible because of the economical set-up in the first act. A local news reporter and her camera man are on assignment for a slice-of-life feature story about firemen and the night shift. It all feels eminently believable, and indeed, real. This grounding permits for a sense of the normal and routine before the film devolves into what can only euphemistically be described as utter pandemonium.

Also, one of the key complaints about found footage horror films from critics and audiences seems

to be that characters keep filming, even when their lives are in danger, or when terrible things occur. Here, that complaint carries little currency. It is Ángela's job to make sure that Pablo keeps filming. She is a reporter, and as she says, "*we have to tell people what is going on here!*" She also frequently reminds Pablo to "*film everything.*"

Ángela, despite the fast-moving crisis she finds herself embroiled in, goes through a solid character arc in the film. She starts out the movie during that personal interest "fluff" piece about the night shift. She flirts with the firemen, obsesses on her appearance, and watches the men play basketball. It's an unimportant assignment, and her demeanor reflects that lack of importance. Once the events at the apartment unfold, Ángela picks up the mantra of real journalist, and realizes that it is her responsibility to make certain that people know the truth behind the unfolding story.

In some way, then, *REC* is actually about the press, and the media. In the 2000s, the American press was roundly excoriated for its support of President Bush leading up to the War in Iraq. American journalists were "embedded" with the troops during the invasion, and because of this fact, adopted the standpoint of a cheerleader, rather than asking important questions of American leaders. By way of comparison, *REC* is the story of a reporter "embedded" with a force that is entering a foreign location too, an infected apartment building. But rather than succumb to the government propaganda about what is happening, she seeks real and true answers for herself. Ángela grows from being a callow, self-obsessed face on camera to a dedicated truth-seeker, and a real journalist, seeking answers.

Finding those answers is not easy because she is stonewalled by authorities at every turn. Contextually, then *REC* thrives in the paranoid post-9/11 milieu, one in which disaster is met with Draconian government over-response, and heightened secrecy, and the rights of the individual are considered secondary or tertiary compared to community security, and hidden, ideological agendas.

Here, the residents are deemed expendable as they are cordoned off, quarantined, and left to their own devices. In one thoroughly horrifying and unexpected shot, a character approaches a window calling for help only to see a plastic shroud—a containment tent—drop over it. They have been entrapped, visually, by the State, simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Even the mystery of the film, involving a secret investigation by the Catholic Church, seems to reinforce fears about the post-9/11 world; that secret agendas are being enacted by powerful corporations and agencies, against, perhaps, the good of the people. In the United States, those agencies might have been Halliburton, or Blackwater, or even the Bush Administration (with the President's ties to Big Oil), but here, it is the secretive Catholic Church that is the cause of the plague. Unknowingly or knowingly, the local state authorities seem to be doing everything they can to cover up this involvement. The tent that blankets the building silences the denizens and their story.

In microcosm, this Spanish film from co-directors Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza diagrams a battle between freedom of speech and overreaching government (represented by the health inspector, and a "*Voice of God*" announcer outside the apartment who instructs the people trapped inside to "*remain calm*" even as they are considered expendable). Among the health inspector's first instructions, incidentally, are "*If I tell you to stop filming you stop filming.*" This edict is in direct opposition to Ángela's "*film everything*" paradigm. Taken together, the film reveals the clash between entrenched power, and a free press. The establishment wants to control what people see and hear. The free press wants the people to be informed.

The inventive, bravura camerawork of *REC* blends perfectly with this timely story of a crisis brewing that government can't handle, and which the press wants to film. But this equation might not be enough, alone, to assess the film one of the greatest horror movies of the decade (which it surely is). That reading becomes even more inevitable in *REC*'s last act, which sees the increasingly desperate Ángela discover the truth behind the plague in an apparently abandoned penthouse. Here, she and Pablo uncover the conspiracy, and a danger that threatens all human life on Earth. Specifically, the source of the plague is not what one would normally consider a virus or bacteria. Instead, it is the blood of a girl possessed by demons. In other words, demons and devils are real, and people are being infected by this very literal brand of non-human evil. It is a striking, inventive turn of events, that makes the epidemic all the more terrifying.

What Ángela and Pablo ultimately find lurking in the attic of this dank chamber of horrors represents some of the most potent horror imagery of the 2000s. The film's final scene is lensed in total, blanketing darkness, with only the small spotlight of the hand-held camera for illumination. When that light breaks down, audiences are left with only very limited night vision to serve as their eyes. Meanwhile, a thing prowls nearby in the dark. It can't see Pablo and Ángela, and they can't see it.

But they find each other, nonetheless.

The film's final shot is also one of the most common of the decade but wrought beautifully here. It is the so-called "*drag me to Hell*" shot. Here, Ángela is on the floor, belly down, facing the camera. Her face is very close to the lens. Something unseen and malevolent pulls her away, out of camera frame, into the darkness. It is a chilling moment.

All along, Ángela and the camera itself have been the audience's beacon of light, and therefore hope in the epidemic. Ángela has been the guide, and the camera has been our eyes, as a veil of darkness falls. That darkness may be a quarantine tent dropped over the building in a failed attempt to contain the crisis. Or that darkness is the thing in the attic and the Biblical "germ" it spreads. But in the end, our guide, and our light lose. Ángela is dragged into the darkness, and the rest of the story goes untold.

Until *REC 2*, anyway.

Nerve jangling, throat-tightening, and utterly horrific, *REC* is a dream for horror films, even though it depicts a nightmare world of conspiracy and terror. The film's found-footage approach is married perfectly to the movie's themes and narrative. This kind of unity in visualization and intent doesn't happen often, so rejoice in this accomplishment.

REC is a perfect horror movie. It is smart, and scary as all Hell.

Resident Evil: Extinction * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"...offers more of the same."—Frank Scheck, *Hollywood Reporter*, September 24, 2007.

"...it's the first of the agonizing *Resident Evil* movies that could remotely be considered fun."—Jim Ridley, *The Village Voice*, September 26, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Milla Jovovich (Alice); Oded Fehr (Carlos Olivera); Ali Larter (Claire); Iain Glen (Dr. Isaacs); Ashanti (Betty); Christopher Egan (Mikey); Spencer Locke (K-Mart); Matthew Marsden (Slater); Linda Ashby (Chase). Mike Epps (L.J.); Joe Hursley (Otto); John Eric Bentley (Umbrella Tuch);

CREW: Screen Gems, Constantin Films, Davis Films, Impact Pictures presents *Resident Evil: Extinction*. Casting: Scot Boland, Victoria Burrows. Costume Designer: Joseph Porro. Production Designer: Eugenio Caballero. Music: Charlie Clouser. Special Effects: Patrick Tatopoulos Design, Mr. X, Rocket Science VFX. Director of Photography: David Johnson. Film Editor: Niven Howie. Producer: Paul W.S. Anderson, Jeremy Bolt, Bernd Eichinger, Samuel Hadida, Robert Kulzer. Executive Producers: Victor Hadida, Martin Moszkowicz, Kelly Van Horn. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Earth has withered into a wasteland following the global release of the T-Virus created by the Umbrella Corp. High-ranking members of Umbrella, as well as desperate scientists, have gone underground into scientific compounds while survivors of the pandemic brave the ravaged planet surface. Alice (Jovovich) joins up with a team of survivors led by Claire (Larter) in the desert near Las Vegas and learns of a nearby Umbrella Outpost. There, a scientist uses a satellite to learn of Alice's presence, and believes that her DNA holds the key to undoing the damage of the T-Virus. While Claire tries to lead the survivors to freedom, Alice decides to take the fight to Umbrella.

COMMENTARY: The second sequel to *Resident Evil* is a mild step up from the mindless *Apocalypse*, even though it is nothing but a hodge-podge of other genre films. To put it in terms a movie fan would understand, *Resident Evil: Extinction* is *The Road Warrior* (1982) meets *Alien Resurrection* (1997), meets *Day of the Dead* (1985).

From *The Road Warrior*, the film takes it above-ground setting: a post-apocalyptic desert terrain, replete with a caravan of families and good people looking for a home in this brave new world. In that film, the survivors of the oil city also fled in a ramshackle caravan, in search of a quasi-mythical promised land, a beach. Here, that quasi-mythical promised land is Alaska, where it is rumored the T-Virus hasn't impacted the environment. Like Max in that film, Alice here sends off the survivors to their promised land, while she stays behind to fight.

The second plotline is a reflection of *Alien Resurrection*. There scientists kept cloning Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in an attempt to create the perfect clone that would feature both her DNA, and the DNA of the Alien Queen. The other clones were cast-off in a chamber of horrors. Here, Dr. Isaacs keeps cloning Alice, and badly misusing those clones in battles with T-Virus infected dogs and zombies. Alice possesses a psychic connection to her clones, much in the way Ripley in *Alien Resurrection* had a low-grade awareness/connection to the aliens.

And then there's the *Day of the Dead* strand of the plot. In that Romero film, scientists and the military were holed up in a base surrounded by chain link fences. Outside the fences, zombies congregated in ever increasing, dangerous numbers. The Umbrella Base is here surrounded by a chain link fence, and by zombies pressing in. Meanwhile, in the subterranean base, Dr. Isaacs' research mirrors the work of *Day of the Dead's* Dr. Frankenstein, as he attempts to prove that the zombies can be domesticated, and even trained to work as soldiers for the corporation. In *Day of the Dead*, Frankenstein proved that the zombies didn't eat humans out of hunger, and Isaacs makes that exact point here.

Certainly, there will be those who call all these plot elements a deliberate homage to beloved films, and yet in combination all the creative referencing feels a bit like artistic bankruptcy. It's always great to see one of the decade's great women warriors—Alice—back in action, and Jovovich doesn't disappoint in her never-ending, elaborate action scenes, but still the film feels a bit empty, and as though it has moved a bit far off from its source material, the video game series.

Even the film's opening scenes, with Jovovich back in her red dress, and back in the Hive, cannibalizes the original *Resident Evil* (2003), again giving the film the sense that it is like the "greatest hits" of post-apocalyptic, zombie movies.

Because no new narrative territory is broached in these 95 minutes, the film feels like a placeholder, or as though the franchise is adrift and treading water. All the elements of the series are here: Alice in full warrior mode, the zombie hordes, the T-Virus, and the evil corporation, but none of these core ingredients have been developed in any way that is fresh, new or engaging. *Resident Evil: Extinction* isn't a bad ride while it lasts, but it's not a ride that you are going to remember with any real fondness after it ends, either.

*Return to the House on Haunted Hill (DTV) * * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Amanda Righetti (Ariel Wolfe); Cerina Vincent (Michelle); Erik Palladino (Desmond); Tom Riley (Paul); Andrew-Lee Potts (Kyle); Jeffrey Combs (Dr. Vannacut); Steven Pacey (Dr. Richard Hammer); Kalita Rainford (Harue); Gil Kolirin (Norris); Andrew Pleavin (Samuel); Chucky Venice (Warren); Stilyna Mitkova (Sara's Ghost)

CREW: Warner Bros. and Dark Castle Entertainment presents *Return to the House on Haunted Hill*. Production Designer: Kes Bonnett. Music: Frederik Wiedmann. Director of Photography: Lorenzo Senatore. Film Editor: Robert Malina. Producers: Erik Olsen, Steve Richards, Roe Sharon Peled, Jonathan Tzachor. Executive Producer: Joel Silver. Based on characters created by: Robb White and William Massa. Directed by:

SYNOPSIS: When her sister Sara, a survivor of the Hill House incident, commits suicide, Ariel Wolfe (Righetti) joins an archaeologist's team for a journey back inside the haunted abode. Their quarry is the lost statue of Baphomet. The idol may be guarded by the ghost of Dr. Vannacut (Combs), the dark spirit from the home (when it is an insane asylum) who killed the previous visitors there.

COMMENTARY: *Return to the House on Haunted Hill* is a slightly better-than-expected, if knowingly low-brow direct-to-video follow-up of the 1999 remake of the 1959 horror film, *House on Haunted Hill*. The film adopts the sequel template of *Aliens* (1986) by sending an armed team of experts (or cannon fodder, essentially) back to the scene of the original horror, but for more action, and more elaborate murder sequences. The result is a fast moving, occasionally quite-clever sequel that doesn't outlast its welcome.

The premise of *Return to the House on Haunted Hill* is that a young woman, Ariel (the Ripley role, essentially), must go into the haunted house with a team of archaeologists to find a lost treasure, the statue of Baphomet. The presence of archaeologists in the drama allows the filmmakers to rip-off the *Indiana Jones* films series too. There are lines spoken here cribbed right out of those Spielberg films, including dialogue about the Baphomet statue belonging in a museum and not in private hands. Beyond such homages, the film is moderately inventive and often quite silly. One room in the haunted house, for instance, sees all the furniture levitating near the ceiling, and one unlucky soul gets a refrigerator dropped on her head. Another room, "*the heart of the house*," is an organic, fleshy room, like an actual heart. And, of course, even though the film is just 81 minutes long, there is plenty of time here for a lesbian ghost scene.

Even the film's denouement, which sees the Evil force's plan come unexpectedly to fruition, is original. In the last scene of the film, the evil house gets what it wants, and the Baphomet statue breaks out into the world, only to be discovered by a couple having sex on the beach. This is a perfect 2000s ending. Ariel has survived with Paul, but the evil escapes into the larger world. In other words, the best we can hope for is to survive. The darkness is going to keep spreading, keep growing. This is a perfect War on Terror Age meditation on evil.

Of course, none of this material has much to do with the original 1950s horror film, or even the 1999 film. And some dreadful CGI mars the exterior footage of the asylum-turned-house-on-haunted-hill (more like a haunted precipice, judging by the computer-generated imagery). Finally, the film has one terrible disappointment. Jeffrey Combs returns as the evil Dr. Vannacut but doesn't get to speak. That distinctive voice and tone, which the actor deploys so successfully throughout horror and sci-fi films and television, goes unheard. That's a miscalculation and shame in a film that seems to understand how to exploit a good thing.

Rise: Blood Hunter ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Liu is the only victor here. Even though she's abused by the script, and the writer-director's desperately inadequate cinematic abilities, she makes Sadie a believable character."—Katherine Monk, *Calgary Herald*: "Hunter never rises above bloody mess," June 1, 2007, page C5.

"...the suspense here is minimal as Lucy Liu goes on a rampage with a stake to revenge the bloodsuckers who turned her, picking them off one by one until a final confrontation with the biggest bad guy—a Brit, of course—who is just plain bad without being particularly ingenious."—Mike Goodridge, *Screen Daily*, May

10, 2007.

"...a movie that is the cinematic equivalent of Vioxx and Sominex. It will put you to sleep, but it will also induce diarrhea, rickets, and projectile leprosy"—Dr. Royce Clemens, *Geeks of Doom*, October 13, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Lucy Liu (Sadie Blake); Robert Forster (Lloyd); Cameron Richardson (Collette/Frannie); Allan Rich (Harrison); Samantha Shelton (LA Weekly Editor); Kevin Wheatley (Ethan Mills); Margo Harshman (Tricia Rawlins); Cameron Goodman (Katilin); Holt McCallany (Rourke); James D'Arcy (Bishop); Carla Gugino (Eve); Michael Chiklis (Clyde Rawlins); Paul Cassell (Det. Easton); Mako (Poe).

CREW: Samuel Goldwyn Films, Mandate Pictures, Kingsgate Films, Destination Films, Ghost House Pictures and Rise Productions presents *Rise: Blood Hunter*. Casting: Nancy Naylor, Kelly Wagner. Production Designer: Jerry Fleming; Costume Designer: Denise Wingate. Special Effects: Comen VFX. Music: Nathan Barr. Director of Photography: John Toll. Film Editor: Lisa Bromwell, Robb Sullivan. Producer: Greg Shapiro. Executive Producers: Aubrey Henderson, Nathan Kahane, Carsten H.W. Lorenz, Sam Raimi, Rob Tapert. Written and Directed by: Sebastian Gutierrez. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Sadie Blake, an *L.A. Weekly* reporter, goes undercover to learn more about a local, seedy underworld of apparent vampires. She gets more than she bargained for, however, and becomes a vampire herself. After attempting to kill herself, Sadie decides to prevent the vampires from harming anyone else and goes on a vendetta against the vampires who made her undead. She joins forces with a cop, Rawlins (Chiklis), and together they must battle the seductive but deadly vampire, Eve (Gugino).

COMMENTARY: Sadly, this one is undead on arrival.

Rise: Blood Hunter actually feels a bit like a novel, graphic or literary, adapted to the big screen. In other words, it is a movie filled with intriguing ideas, yet none of them are fully formed, as if the nuance was lost in translation to the new medium. That isn't the case, however. This is an original screenplay, written by director Gutierrez. Yet it feels so much at times like a piece of something bigger, and something more well-thought out than the audience only gets partial access to.

One has hopes that Sadie Blake could be a great horror hero along the lines of Selene in the *Underworld* series, or Alice in the *Resident Evil* franchise. She could be a female version, indeed, of Marvel's Daywalker, Blade. Lucy Liu is a capable actor who moves well and transmits great charisma and personality on camera. Yet this is not a feminist action masterpiece, as one might hope.

Instead the film feels long, dull and unexciting, and like no real thought has been given to theme or narrative. For example, Sadie is obviously drawn to outsiders, to sub-cultures outside the L.A. mainstream. She infiltrates the goth scene and shows great excitement to learn about the vampire scene. Why is she this way? Her character is never explored, but certainly Sadie must feel disenchantment or at least boredom with the establishment. She seeks out assignments that grant the opportunity to live outside it, to explore, to experiment.

Rise: Blood Hunter could be deeply exciting, stimulating and erotic, given the lead character and her propensity to explore non-traditional co-cultures. Instead, the movie is a fairly predictable vampire movie, and Sadie doesn't really inspire any of the action. She gets turned into a vampire and the first thing she wants to do is kill herself. Then she calls her Mom.

Not the stuff of fierce action set-pieces.

Instead of exploring Sadie's rebirth into an alternative lifestyle, *Rise: Blood Hunter* chooses an easy narrative path. It becomes a straight-up revenge action picture, like so many straight-up revenge action-pictures. The reporter launches a vendetta against those who killed her and made her a creature of the night. She teams with a cop who has lost his daughter to the vampires to fight that war, and it's all just a bit shallow.

If *Rise: Blood Hunter* had drawn a more careful arc for Sadie's character, this review might look

very different. She starts the film wishing to be an explorer in the exotic, and then when she gets what she wants, she rebels. What if, instead, the film had spent more time exploring her life as a vampire and allowing Sadie to feel something other than revulsion for what she has become? What if she liked to kill, instead of hating what she has become? All too conveniently, Sadie becomes a self-hating vampire so she can dispatch the other vampires. The film would feel more compelling if Sadie's feelings weren't so cut and dry. What if she liked being bad, or at least had to battle that impulse to be a predator?

Rise: Blood Hunter is a kind of sub-par John Wick with Vampires, despite moments of intrigue and interest. Carla Gugino and Robert Forster are both impressive in the film, suggesting characters of deep motivations and strange, unusual histories. That's why the movie feels like a (bad) adaptation of a longer work. There are aspirations and intimations of greatness here, all left like a blood trail at the scene of the crime. The viewer can only view that trail and consider where it might have led had the movie possessed what Sadie seems to possess in spades: a fascination with the dark side of life.

Rob Zombie's Halloween * * * *

Critical Reception

"...Zombie's idea of re-imagining is to include a lot more back story about young Michael Myers, a moppet with a bushel of messy hair and a propensity for masks and killing animals."—Bruce De Mara, *Toronto Star*: "Halloween is early this year, regrettably; Rob Zombie's re-do of 1978 classic a bad trick to play on moviegoers," September 2, 2007, page E20.

"Consider this a grave disappointment."—Adam Graham, *Detroit News*: "Movie review: Zombie's Halloween is more trick than treat." September 1, 2007.

"After the unfortunate mistake that was *Halloween: Resurrection*—I get it—the Producers probably weren't sure where to go with this franchise. I get it. John Carpenter's *Halloween* is a beautiful, elegant, stylish, and wonderfully crafted example of a horror film. It would make my top ten of the genre easily, potentially cracking the top five.

Rob Zombie's *Halloween* is garbage. It has none of the elegance of Carpenter's original. The performances are nothing special—Malcolm McDowell was probably as good a choice as any to step into the shoes of Donald Pleasence, but the character as written, like all of the other characters, was a misfire. This entire film seemed like an attempt to have the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* family adopt little Mikey M. Everything that made *The Shape* special has either been explained or amplified to the point that it doesn't even feel like a *Halloween* movie. It's just a series of bad people being killed in bad ways and the most unfortunate victim was the evening I spent at the movies watching it. It's hyperbole, I know. But I'll use the word—this film defiled the franchise. I left the theater angry. When they remade *Nightmare on Elm Street* I left the theater as disappointed as everyone else, wondering why the filmmakers couldn't have gotten closer to the mark. I wasn't angry at them. Rob Zombie made a sequel to his *Halloween* that I refused to watch and still haven't. Thankfully, *Halloween 2018* came out so that I could lose my anger (and instead move to the same disappointment I felt at the *Nightmare on Elm Street* remake)."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Malcolm McDowell (Dr. Samuel Loomis); Brad Dourif (Sheriff Lee Brackett); Scout Taylor-Compton (Laurie Strode); Danielle Harris (Annie Brackett); Tyler Mane (Michael Myers); Daeg Faerch (Michael Myers, Age 10); Sheri Moon Zombie (Deborah Myers); William Forsythe (Ronnie White); Richard Lynch (Principal Chambers); Hanna Hall (Judith Myers); Skyer Gisondo (Tommy Doyle); Jenny Gregg Stewart (Lindsey Wallace); Dee Wallace (Ms. Strode); Pat Skipper (Mr. Strode); Udo Kier (Morgan Walker); Clint Howard (Doctor Koplenson); Danny Trejo (Ismael Cruz); Bill Moseley (Ach); Leslie Easterbrook (Patty Frost); Tom Towles (Larry Redgrave); Ken Foree (Big Joe Grizzly); Sybil Danning (Nurse Wynn); Sid Haig (Chester);

CREW: Dimension Films, Nightfall Productions, Spectacle Entertainment Group, The Weinstein Company

and Trancas International Films present *Halloween*. Casting: Monika Mikkelsen. Production Designer: Anthony Tremblay. Costume Designer: Mary McLeod. Special Effects: Custom Film Effects, Post Logic Studios. Music: Tyler Bates. Director of Photography: Phil Parmet. Film Editor: Glenn Garland. Producers: Malek Akkad, Andy Gould, Rob Zombie. Executive Producers: Matthew Stein, Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein. Based on *Halloween* by: John Carpenter and Debra Hill. Written and Directed by: Rob Zombie. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 109 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Ten-year-old Michael Myers (Faerch), living in an abusive household in Haddonfield, strikes out at his family on Halloween night, murdering his abusive stepfather, Ronnie (Forysthe), and his sister, Judith (Hall). His baby sister, Laurie, and his mother, Deborah (Moon Zombie), survive the ordeal as Michael is incarcerated at a sanitarium and treated by Dr. Samuel Loomis (McDowell). After seventeen years, Michael breaks out of custody and returns to Haddonfield to kill again, this time pursuing his now-teenaged sister, Laurie (Compton).



Michael Myers (Tyler Mane) attacks final girl Laurie Strode (Scout Taylor Compton) in *Rob Zombie's Halloween* (2007).

COMMENTARY: Horror fans faced news of a remake of John Carpenter's *Halloween* with grave concern, and outright suspicion. *Halloween* is one of the five most important titles in horror film history, and a perfect motion picture in the eyes of most fans and film scholars. The central question for any remake of this classic: how could such a great film reasonably be improved upon?

And, since improving on the original film in this case seems a near impossibility, why go out and make an inferior film?

What *Halloween* fans got, however, in 2007, was not corporate pabulum designed to cash in on a brand name. Instead, the remake was a total re-imagination or rethinking of the *Halloween* universe, from the eyes of a most singular artist, Rob Zombie. Already in the aughts, Zombie had proven with *House of a 1,000 Corpses* and *The Devil's Rejects* that he possessed an artist's eye, and imagination for horror imagery, character and narratives.

So, what kind of *Halloween* did he make?

Simply put, the filmmaker created a stunning and inventive film. If John Carpenter created a universe in which a force of pure evil, "The Shape," or Michael Myers, invaded placid, "good" American suburbia, then Zombie flipped that conceit on its head. Michael Myers in Zombie's universe is an abused child, a receptacle for abuse at home, and immorality from the pop culture outside the home. Society has failed too, as law enforcement, the media, and even psychiatry all seem to exist in a place of shame where they can't reasonably help anyone, and exist, it seems, just to frustrate expectations and hopes. In Carpenter's vision, Michael is a twisted anomaly, an avatar of evil operating in a just society. In Zombie's vision, Myers is the inevitable result of a corrupt society.

Another way to phrase this difference in *Halloween* incarnations is as follows: J.C.'s *Halloween* was about a monster coming home, but who, despite his human appearance, was the Boogeyman. Society is not ready to handle something so monstrous.

By contrast, Rob Zombie's *Halloween* concerns a monstrous and corrupt society, that, unsurprisingly, gives life to a very human monster and, similarly, can't contend with it. Although Zombie's films always possess a blue-collar, redneck vibe, his approach to this material is not all that different from one might imagine George Romero undertaking: *the de-mythologizing of a monster*.

As Romero had de-mythologized the zombie in his living dead cycle, and the vampire in *Martin*, Zombie here undertakes the task of demythologizing Michael Myers. The boogeyman was gone and the "shape" or contours of Michael Myers' character and biography are filled in. John Carpenter's is the cinematic *Halloween* for the 1970s, Rob Zombie's film is the "real" horror, for the 2000s.

The first half of Zombie's *Halloween*, which charts Michael's development as a teenager, and then his incarceration at a mental institute that fails him are absorbing, and brilliantly vetted. This half of the film represents a full-scale opening up of the universe, and it features moments that *Halloween* fans have long been excited to see, including Michael's first meeting with Dr. Loomis, and also, the details of his escape from Smith's Grove.

But before getting to that, this version of *Halloween* cuts its teeth on a depiction of a brutal home life for young Michael. The Myers House is a broken home in so many ways, as is immediately obvious. Young Michael's father figure, Ronnie, is a white-trash monster who assails Michael's sexuality and torments him. Michael's mother, Deborah, is simultaneously an overly sexualized figure and absent mother. She's a stripper, and Michael can't deal with the cruel jokes his peers at school make about her. He loves his mother with a pure heart but feels conflict about her work. There's both an attraction to his mother, it seems, and the recognition that her vocation somehow cheapens the emotion of love they share. After all, if she shows similar affection for the men she strips for, is her affection for him real? If she is merely acting her affection for those men, then is her affection for him, similarly phony? This is a lot for Michael to process. On Halloween night in the film, Zombie crosscuts between Michael sitting at home alone, self-soothing with sugary treats, while his mother dances, or strips, at the Rabbit in Red lounge.

As the early portions of Rob Zombie's *Halloween* make plain, Michael feels powerless and confused. He can't control his family, especially his mother, so he kills small animals instead. They are the only creatures he *can* control. With the cats and rats that he murders, Michael doesn't feel helpless.

Michael learns young that to destroy something is to hold power over that thing, and in this realization is the seed of his monstrosity. He puts on a mask to kill the boys who are bullying him and must recognize in that moment, that he is even more powerful when divorced from his identity, from the way the world views him.

The world views him as a sick little loser. Behind the mask, Michael can be free. As he later tells Loomis, *"I like the mask because it hides my face. It hides my ugliness."* Again, this recognition of the mask's utility comes with real power in the film. The familiar John Carpenter theme song is first played in Zombie's film when Michael kills his first human being. This connection of Michael's first human murder to the world-famous theme song suggests his real birth.

To his credit, Zombie even manages to form a connection between the horror marathon on TV and Michael's apotheosis to monstrosity. Seen on TV is the 1951 version of *The Thing*, starring James Arness. The monster in that film is a white-faced giant wearing, basically, a dark, featureless jump-suit. That is also Michael's uniform and coloring. In taking on that mask, he sees himself as a "powerful thing" outside of humanity, capable of passing judgment on it.

Once imprisoned, Michael, the formerly *"angelic young boy,"* wants to go home and begs his mother to go home. He claims to have no memory of murdering Ronnie or stabbing his sister, Judith, seventeen times on Halloween night. Devastated by her beloved son's behavior, Deborah instructs him to *"look beyond the walls,"* and to *"live inside your head."* This is the worst advice she could give him, as Michael retreats further from reality, and builds a collection of masks behind which he hides. Later, Deborah goes home and, after watching home movies of her now-shattered family, kills herself.

Michael has taken another victim, unwittingly, and the hardest one to come back from.

For its first hour or so, Rob Zombie forges an absorbing, tantalizing atmosphere as, with brilliant and insightful touches, he charts the childhood and emerging maturity of Michael Myers. At the same time, he juxtaposes Michael's retreat to psychosis with the amorality and corruption of the world around him. The prison guards are rapists, and Dr. Loomis is no longer a white knight hunting a dragon, but an opportunist hunting another book deal. At one especially telling point, Loomis, the author of *"The Devil's Eyes: The Story of Michael Myers,"* notes to an audience that *"these are the eyes of a psychopath."* But tellingly, the composition that Zombie has given us is of Loomis's eyes. This shot suggests that Loomis, our avatar for a corrupt and useless society, is as mad, in his own way, as Michael is.

Other figures in the film are as corrupt, or worse, than Loomis. The prison guards rape their wards, taking advantage of powerless people. And Michael's high school principal has so little a moral compass that he can't see that Michael has been the victim of bullies, not vice versa. The equation is clear: society has taken that angelic young boy and, through its coarseness and lack of moral compass, transformed him into a monster.

As one might gather from this review, *Rob Zombie's Halloween* is an uncompromising, harrowing and frequently, lurid and nihilistic take on the Michael Myers story, a veritable shotgun blast to the face at point-blank range. Alas, the last half of the remake *Halloween* can't possibly live up to the ingenuity and originality of Michael's rise. Here, Zombie slavishly recreates the plot of the 1978 film, with Michael returning to Haddonfield to stalk Laurie, Linda and Annie. Those teenage characters barely register here, and by re-staging events and incidents from the original, Zombie only reveals he doesn't possess Carpenter's visual chops.

Which is not to say that he doesn't have *any* chops. The first half of the film proves conclusively that Zombie can create a mood, develop characters and tell a story. What Zombie can't do, however, is generate the same sense of suspense as his predecessor. When he misguidedly tries to ape Carpenter's background-foreground "boo" moments wherein the white mask emerges from darkness, the moments fall flat. The kills in the film are universally violent, made more so by the occasional "trembling" of the actual film stock, and by the decision to cast a veritable hulking giant in the role of Myers, but not preceded by even the most rudimentary sense of suspense. This factor makes a compelling film turn oddly disjointed in its last act.

On retrospect, however, the predictable nature of the film's last act doesn't entirely subtract from the film's accomplishments or success. The ending was always a foregone conclusion: Michael Myers is a

monster running amok. On the contrary, what distinguishes the film is the way it tells the story of Michael's descent into madness as a teenager.

In the film, Dr. Loomis states that Michael is the “*perfect storm*” of nature and nurture, and Zombie's screenplay explains that “*white*” (the color of Michael's mask) is actually “*all colors of the spectrum*,” which could mean that Myers is a product of “*all colors*” (meaning both nurture and nature). However, unlike the character in the first film—a good man whom the audience could trust—this particular Dr. Loomis is not a figure of authority and decency whom the audience should trust. He might say Michael is the perfect storm of nature and nurture, but the film doesn't follow through with this point of view. Oppositely, the white mask—all colors of the spectrum—represents not nature and nurture, but rather “all” the evil faces of our society. Michael has seen evil and corruption and disappointment everywhere, in every person he has encountered in his young life, and now his choice of mask color reflects back all those various shades of evil. In the film we see him try on different “faces” (including an orange mask), but it is white—the multifaceted, inclusive “color” that best suits him and his experience.

If you take “The Boogeyman” aspect out of the *Halloween* equation—which this film does—one can see why Zombie makes all the other creative decisions he does. This Michael can survive gun shots not because he is “The Shape” but because he is literally a hulking, unstoppable giant who is cut off from his feelings, ostensibly including pain. This Myers is physically huge, a colossus. For this reason, whenever there are discussions of the Boogeyman in this *Halloween*, they ring 100 percent false. They're off-message. There is no symbolism to back up talk of the Boogeyman.

Zombie also replaces The Shape's preternatural calm while stalking, pursuing and murdering victims with something else: *unfettered ferocity*. There's a scene near the end of the film in which Laurie hides in an attic and Michael uses a two-by-four to literally pulp the entire attic floor, and it is nothing less-than-exhilarating. The creepy, always-watching “Shape” Michael has been replaced by an angry, shock-and-awe Michael, and it's an appropriate switch for the aughts.

That is why this film earns its four stars.

Ultimately, Rob Zombie has given the world a *Halloween* for the 2000s. He proves with this remake that he possesses a shocking, mad, upsetting, grotesque, divisive vision of Michael Myers and Myers' world.

It's our world too, he seems to say.

So, no, horror fans, this is not your father's *Halloween*. But it is not your father's world anymore, either.

Saw IV * * ½

Critical Reception

“There may be more torture and gore, but there isn't a morality play.... Believe it or not, this is a big part of why the first two films succeeded, and I don't think the new writers understood.”—Zachary Doiron, *Film Inquiry*: “*Saw IV*: An Unaware Parody of Itself,” September 27, 2017.

“We now find ourselves in the downward slope of the *Saw* series...”—Wesley Lovell, *Cinema Sight*, October 31, 2009.

“Stultifying in its pseudo-sensationalist schlock...”—Frank Chieng, *World Voice News*, November 1, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Tobin Bell (Jigsaw/John Kramer); Costas Mandylor (Lt. Mark Hoffman); Scott Peterson (Agent Peter Strahm); Betsy Russell (Jill Tuck); Lyriq Bent (Det. Rigg); Athena Karkanis (Agent Perez); Justin Louis (Art Blank); Simon Reynolds (Lamanna); Donnie Wahlberg (Eric Matthews); Angus MacFadyen (Jeff Denlon); Bahar Soomekh (Lynn Denion); Dina Meyer (Detective Kerry).

CREW: Lionsgate and Twisted Pictures present *Saw IV*. Casting: Stephanie Gorin. Costume Designer: Alex Kavanaugh. Production Designer: David Hackl. Music: Charles Clouser. Director of Photography: David A. Armstrong. Film Editors: Kevin Greutert, Brett Sullivan. Producers: Mark Bug, Gregg Hoffman, Oen Koules. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Jason Constantine, Daniel Jason Heffner, Stacey Testro, James Wan, Leigh Whannell. Story by: Patrick Melton, Marcus Dunstan, Thomas Fenton. Written by: Patrick Melton and Marcus Dunstan. Directed by: Darren Lynn Bousman. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 9 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A policeman, Hoffman (Mandylor), conducts an autopsy of John Kramer (Bell), the former Jigsaw Killer, and finds an audio tape reporting that he will be the next victim of a game. Elsewhere, Detective Rigg (Bent) is also engaged in one of the murderous jigsaw games, thus suggesting that Jigsaw had a second accomplice, or at least a copycat.

COMMENTARY: This is the *Saw* entry that is the demarcation point for this author. Here, the new doesn't outweigh the old. The intelligence doesn't outweigh the over-the-top gore, and the new characters don't capture the interest as well as many of those who have come and gone from the saga in such colorful fashion.

Saw IV features many flashbacks and many different colors and light filters yet is still the weakest entry in the canon up till this point. Costas Mandylor becomes the new villain, but he is not a particularly expressive actor, and doesn't embody or transmit the intelligence one would expect from a Jigsaw protégé. Jigsaw, played by Bell, is a master puppet master. He possesses a real calm and equanimity even when faced with death or arrest (witness his behavior with Matthews in *Saw II*, for example). His first protégé, Amanda (Shawnee Smith) is believable given their background or history together, though she ultimately rejects his philosophy.

Oppositely, Hoffman is kind of a ... brick wall.

He transmits as malicious when his cards are revealed, but not as clever, or particularly intelligent. The whole idea of Jigsaw is to "see" what Jigsaw sees, but that actually requires a certain lens, a certain bit of nuance. Jigsaw's world view is not one that the viewer easily imagines that Mandylor would embrace, even if forced to so do so. Begging the actor's pardon, but he just doesn't seem that ... deep. Accordingly, speaking on a personal level now, the Hoffman-led years of the saga are this author's least favorite of the canon.

The film's big surprise at the end is one involving time, and it works just fine, but even more so than in *Saw III*, one can sense the grinding of the machine at work here. The film pays lip service to John's philosophy ("*cherish your life*") and brings back Jeff from Part III and Eric from Part II, but there is nothing new here worth championing, and no deep philosophical meaning, or new connection to the culture. The latter flaw is rectified in *Saw V*, a little, and in *Saw VI*, a lot.

Probably the one most intriguing element of *Saw IV* is also the most unnecessary. This film explores the relationship between John and his wife Jill and shows a terrifying incident when she is pregnant. A door is slammed into her belly and she loses the fetus while she is seven months pregnant. This is certainly a galvanizing event in Kramer's life. He loses something important and must claw his way back from tragedy. This loss is the crucible for his philosophy, and for his games. The moments featuring Jigsaw and his wife are well-acted and the heart of a really gory film.

But, of course, we're back to the old debate.

Do we need to know precisely what motivates a monster?

Is it necessary to see John's back story at all? Is he scarier, in fact, if we don't know that he lost a baby, and that this loss was the thing that formed him? As people like to write on the Internet, your mileage may vary. Watching the film objectively, this author likes the scenes in the film with John the best, but also can question their value, entirely, to the film and the ongoing *Saw* saga.

This film also features a change in direction. At the end of *Saw III*, Jeff had to help his daughter, who was about to embark on a game of her. That thread is not picked up in *Saw IV*. For a film series that

relies so heavily on a tight continuity and flashbacks, it is an ominous sign that threads are getting left on the floor, as new minds and new talents seek to imprint their mark on *Saw*, rather than follow the program already established.

Saw IV isn't terrible.

It's just the least good *Saw* movie so far.

When one binge watches this movie, in order, with the rest of the saga, for instance, it doesn't stand out visually or narratively as a notable or shocking outlier.

Saw IV is just another old saw.

Shrooms (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Lindsey Haun (Tara); Jack Hudson (Jake); Max Kasch (Troy); Maya Hazen (Lisa); Alice Greczyn (Holly); Robert Hoffman (Bluto); Don Wycherley (Ernie); Sean McGinley (Bernie); Toby Sedgwick (Black Brother); Andre Pollack (The Dog); Jack Gleeson (Lonely Twin); Mark Carbery (Paramedic); Joe Murphy (Feral Boy).

CREW: Magnolia Pictures, Capitol Films, Ingenious Film Partners, Treasure Entertainment, Potboiler Pictures, in association with Bord Scannan nah Eireann and Screen Ireland, present a Nordisk Film, *Shrooms*. Casting: Natasha Cuba, Kelly Wagner. Costume Designer: Rosie Hackett. Production Designer: Mark Geraghty. Music: Dario Marianelli. Director of Photography: Nanu Segal. Film Editor: Dermot Diskin. Producers: Paddy McDonald, Robert Waipole. Executive Producers: Simon Channing Williams, James Clayton, Gail Egan, Kim Magnusson, Duncan Reid. Written by: Pearse Elliott. Directed by: Paddy Breathnach. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Five American college students, endeavoring to experience “*the trip of a lifetime*,” head to Ireland and Glengarriff Forest Park to meet their friend Jake (Hudson), and go on a tour collecting and taking hallucinogenic mushrooms. One of the students, Tara (Haun), is warned not to take a particularly dangerous mushroom, a death's head, that serves as a “*portal to another dimension*,” and which is reputed to provides the taker the gift of premonition, and shapeshifting. Tara takes that mushroom inadvertently and experiences seizures and weird visions. Soon, the students are being killed one at a time by the dangerous locals, but also by malevolent, apparently supernatural forces.

COMMENTARY: The road-trip-gone-wrong sub-genre of horror meets the 1980s slasher paradigm in *Shrooms*, a surprisingly entertaining and fun horror movie about, at least on the surface, the dangers of taking drugs. Here, a group of Americans run afoul of dangerous locals, who are depicted not merely as different, but barely civilized; barely human. “*That's what we call the indigenous people*,” a character observes dismissively. The partying youngsters also run afoul of strange spiritual forces, or so it seems, allowing for a rubber reality component to bleed into the proceedings. Then, there is a revelation at the film's denouement that forces a re-evaluation of everything.

Accordingly, *Shrooms* is an accomplished and rollicking genre blender. In addition to the elements listed above, the film also provides a more coherent explanation than the better-known and better-regarded *High Tension* for the new-in-the-2000s paradigm of the final girl and the film's boogeyman being housed in the same person/body, the result of a fractured consciousness. Additionally, the film plays on the post-9/11 xenophobia evidenced by films such as *Hostel* (2005). Basically, it warns that outside the confines of America, evil forces are waiting to murder Americans. The film's ending, set in a remote house in the forest, also suggests, like *Session 9* (2001), the idea of all of us living in a haunted, ruined present. The sins of the past are present in our world, in a very real way.

Despite the disparate formats it attempts to accommodate into its narrative, *Shrooms* all comes down to a series of fun murder set-pieces, via the slasher paradigm, that adroitly skirts the boundary between reality and hallucination. Because they are high, the college students here can't distinguish fantasy from nightmare, and neither can the audience at times. The film features talking cows, dancing imagery on a tent wall, and other oddities. The filmmakers make the most from this confusion between real and hallucination and create a film that is a wild trip itself.

One memorable scene involves a local legend about a traveler happening upon a car where two people are having sex. The traveler is invited to join in and experience a "happy ending." Here, one of the tripped-out college students happens upon a car, and lives a version of that legend, though with a most distinct unhappy ending.

At the end of fellatio, his penis gets bitten off.

Shrooms utilizes so many different aspects of the horror movie that it seems like a perfect distillation of America's early 21st-century fears. The whole movie is about an overload of dreads, of dreads coming from all directions, much like the under-siege middle class in the 2000s. Local unwashed mountain men out to kill you (a vehicle for 9/11 fears and xenophobia)? *Check!* A person isn't what they appear to be, and may be both your friend and a murderer (a reflection, perhaps, of the new age of Social Media and catfishing)? *Check!* Urban legends come to life to kill you? (a commentary on the disappearing consensus reality and separate news bubbles and facts of red and blue America)? *Check!* Visually, the film even reflects these different menaces and visions, as, at the end, a triple image of Tara resolves into one image. It's as off all horrors are blending into one reality. *Our reality.* But no matter the particular horror, the result is the same: madness and death.

Shrooms isn't a great movie, but for a film that tries to genuflect to so many horror traditions, it works surprisingly well. The organizing principle of "the drug trip" gives the filmmakers license to go for the gusto, and the result is a film that, while unheralded, gets the job done. *Shrooms* is funny and scary, and on top of all that, meaningful in its own way. It seems to note that even as the post-9/11 generation seeks to tune out from the horror (via the mushrooms), the myriad threats of the time are going to find it.

Tune out all you want. The horror is real and coming at you from all sides.

*The Signal (DTV) * * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Anessa Ramsey (Mya Denton); Sahr (Rod); AJ Bowen (Lewis Denton); Matthew Stanton (Matt Stanton); Suehyla El-Attar (Janice); Justin Wellborn (Ben Capstone); Cheri Christian (Anna); Scott Poythress (Clark); Christopher Thomas (Ken); Lindsey Garrett (Laura); Chad McKnight (Jim Parsons); Claire Bronson (Sightless Woman); Dave Bruckner (Screaming Man).

CREW: Magnet Releasing, POPfilms and Shoreline Entertainment present *The Signal*. Costume Designer: Caroline Dieter. Production Designer: Lisa Yeiser. Music: Ben Lovett. Film Editors: David Bruckner, Dan Bush, Jacob Gentry. Producers: Jacob Gentry, Alexander A. Motlagh. Executive Producers: David C. Ballard, Pete Ballard, Hilton Garrett, Morris Ruskin. Written and Directed by: David Bruckner, Dan Bush, Jacob Gentry. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 103 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A strange signal broadcasts through television sets across Los Angeles, and possibly the world, and begins to transform people who have seen and heard it into unstable, homicidal maniacs. Mya (Denton), a married woman having an affair with a lover, Ben (Wellborn), leaves his apartment and returns home. There, her husband, Lewis (Bowen), succumbs to the signal. Mya attempts to escape the city, even as Lewis and Ben both try to find her, for different reasons. Along the way, they all make an unwanted and bizarre pit stop at an apartment where a New Year's Eve party has turned strange and

dangerous. Finally, the love triangle is settled at a train station with the help of one of the party hosts, Clark (Poythress).

COMMENTARY: *The Signal* is a low-budget horror film that is a variation on two ideas that were very popular in the 2000–2009 period.

The first, of course, is the zombie movie. In zombie films, society and infrastructure collapses, and people turn into murderous, unthinking monsters who kill one another, and the killing escalates. *The Signal* doesn't utilize the term zombies, but like *28 Days Later* is a zombie movie by any other name.

The second trend, one popularized by the J-Horror Remakes is the idea of 21st technology serving as a portal for death and terror. Films such as *The Ring* (VHS tapes), *Pulse* (cell phones) and *One Missed Call* (cell phone again) all deal with this concept; that evil enter our lives through the ubiquitous devices we keep in our homes, or on our bodies.

Here, the signal that causes the mental zombification of the city folk originates from the television set. This signal “*disrupts synaptic neural networks*,” creating a “*psychotronic resonance*.”

Uniquely, the film narrative is split into three related segments that are parsed in terms related to technology, “Transmission 1: Crazy in Love,” “Transmission 2: The Jealousy Monster,” and “Transmission 3: Escape from Terminus.” The segments are different in tone from one another, a fact which takes away a bit from the coherence of the overall tale. “Crazy in Love” plays like a straight-up horror/zombie movie, “The Jealousy Monster” is the least successful of the movements, a campy and silly affair, and “Escape from Terminus” ascends to a fascinating plane of the metaphysical. Overall, the first and third segments are the best, and only the weak middle segment prevents the film from earning a higher star rating.

The Signal opens very strongly, with the sense that this could be a *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) for a new era. Mya leaves her tryst with Ben unaware of the inexplicable change in the world going on around here (because she is wearing her headphones—another stab at portraying the dangers of technology). At first, it isn't clear what is happening, and then incident piles upon incident. There is the vibe or shift in social order that is sudden and bizarre, and a new set of rules coming into play. These moments are lensed effectively, and well-acted. After the discovery that everyone is “*dead, dying or flipped*,” the film focuses back on relationships and the central love triangle. Mya's escape from her husband is harrowing and tense and culminates with a car crash. Again, all of this work is highly compelling, and the film's low-budget nature grants the movie energy that a more polished, big-budget movie simply couldn't showcase. The feeling here, in the early minutes, is of a masterpiece in the making.

And then comes the second transmission, set at that party, and the film falls apart. The characters in that apartment don't react as any normal people would to the circumstances occurring in the outside world. The campy tone and over-played characters feel like a misstep and diversion from the story that everyone is most interested in: the love triangle. This story loses track of Mya and eschews horror and verisimilitude for what apparently aims to be a critique of etiquette and social norms but feels utterly interminable. Regaining momentum after this sequence is difficult. All the solid work of the first transmission is undone, and audiences will find their investment in the film diminished.

The film's third transmission is fascinating, and the place where everything starts to come together is more than a simple zombie tale. “*If we change the things we look at, the things we look at change*,” the dialogue suggests. This is a commentary on a problem that rose to the surface of America in the late 1990s and the 2000s, and then became amplified in the Trump Era. Basically, when the Fairness Doctrine was still in place in the 1970s and early 1980s, news organizations had a responsibility to objectivity and truth. With the end of that Doctrine (in the Reagan Era) hate talk radio rose. 24-hour cable news stations arose too, catering to specific demographics. MSNBC became the bubble for liberals and progressives. And Fox News became the bubble for right-leaning and conservative views. People became separated not by facts, by their bubbles, and their own predispositions and biases. Liberals hated Bush and could comfortably live in that bubble at MSNBC. Conservatives hated Obama and could dwell

there just fine via Fox.

We changed the things we look at, and then those things changed too, becoming ever more divisive. The problem became even more pronounced with the advent of social media like MySpace, Facebook and Twitter, circa 2007–2008, where again, consumers could select to exist only in the bubble that confirmed their ideologies and belief system.

What did America find out about itself from this new media hierarchy? No one wanted to leave those information bubbles to experience actual reality. For all the liberal talk about tolerance, their diet of progressive news meant that they did not have to tolerate any opinion other than theirs. For all the conservative talk about personal responsibility and accountability, they did not take the personal responsibility or accountability to leave their bubble and seek out objective fact.

In 2020, when a real crisis, a pandemic, hit America, these separate bubbles proved to be as dangerous as the coronavirus itself, propagating misinformation and disinformation on a scale that actually proved fatal to American citizens. In this particular instance, it was the conservative bubble that had become more toxic, equating public health measures with tyranny, and believing the virus a “democratic hoax.”

The Signal couldn’t have forecast all this, but it did capture two ideas that would increasingly roil American culture.

The first idea is that our devices can be a portal for insidious external input. They are portals of danger and destruction in some ways.

Secondly, the film explores the idea that we are meaningfully changed or altered by imagery/content from our devices. We take information from the Internet or the TV, and that new information alters our behaviors and beliefs. That information can make us “hate,” make us “love,” and even make us violent. It can convince us of things that aren’t true, or accurate. To put a fine point of it, someone can beam information onto our screens, and without knowing their agenda, we become activated, “flipped” by that signal, and we change how we act. It’s a terrifying idea, but one that seems, today, obvious. We are triggered to act by the bubbles we select for ourselves and remain trapped inside. In that way, we are the zombies or zombie-like creations imagined by *The Signal*, lurching into an information age trance that augments ignorance, sows division, and devours our community and sense of public good.

Two-thirds of *The Signal* are really good, not merely for playing with these ideas but for visualizing them in intriguing and original ways. If only that level of success had been consistent. The second story just sucks the life out of a good movie.

Skinwalkers ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Sadly, this effort, featuring creature effects by no less than multiple Oscar winner Stan Winston, is a low-budget piece of schlock that doesn’t even manage to impress on a technical level. Lon Chaney Jr. transformed into a werewolf more convincingly.”—Frank Scheck, *Hollywood Reporter*, August 13, 2007, page 12.

“Alternating between unconvincing action set-pieces and passages of inane, clenched-chopper conflict, *Skinwalkers* is likely to leave all but the most dedicated comic convention devotees bolting like terrified bunnies for the exit.”—Geoff Pevere, *Toronto Star*, August 10, 2007, page E6.

“*Skinwalkers* isn’t quite the dog some might suspect, but it’s not much better than any given Sci Fi Channel telepic. It looks cheap and lacks thrills...”—Stax, *IGN*: “*Skinwalkers* Review” “This werewolf flick is all bark and no bite.” August 10, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jason Behr (Varek); Elias Koteas (Jonas Talbot); Rhona Mitra (Rachel Talbot); Natassia Malthe (Sonja); Kim Coates (Zo); Sarah Carter (Katherine); Tom Jackson (Will); Matthew Knight (Timothy Talbot);

Rogue Johnson (Grenier); Barbara Gordon (Nana); Shawn Roberts (Albert Kilmer); Lyriq Bent (Doak); Christine Brubaker (Justine); Romar Podhora (Ralph).

CREW: Lionsgate, Constantin Film, Stan Winston Productions, Skinwalkers DCP in association with Red Moon Films present Skinwalkers. Casting: Dierdre Bowen. Production Designer: David Hackl. Costume Designer: Antoinette Messaim. Special Effects: Tim Barraball, Damon Bishop, Mr. X. Music: Andrew Lockington. Directors of Photography: David A. Armstrong, Adam Kane. Film Editor: Allan Lee. Producers: Dennis Berard, Dan Carmody. Executive Producers: Brian J. Gilbert, Robert Kulzer. Written by: James DeMonaco, Todd Hartan, James Roday. Directed by: James Isaac. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 103 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A boy soon to turn thirteen, named Timothy (Knight), learns that he is part of a strange, supernatural prophecy. On his birthday, he will find a cure for all skinwalkers, werewolves inhabiting the southwestern United States, thus restoring them to humanity. Timothy and his mother Rachel (Mitra) are unaware of his special destiny, though everyone else in his town of Huguenot is a skinwalker and secretly protects Timothy from harm. Unfortunately, a cadre of evil skinwalkers, who don't wish to be cured of their animalistic nature, want to kill Timothy. This group is led by Timothy's estranged father, the biker Varek (Behr),

COMMENTARY: “*There some things in the world that are so frightening, we pretend they don't exist,*” a voice-over narration explains at the beginning of *Skinwalkers*. It's an odd note on which to commence this particular film because *Skinwalkers* is a horror film that doesn't focus much on the scares, or even the frightening aspects of the titular monster: “*skinwalkers*,” a term used interchangeably with “*werewolf*” here. In fact, the film's one genuine opportunity to go full-on, blood simple with the horror material—a brutal attack on an out-of-the-way redneck bar that evokes a similar (but better...) scene in *Near Dark* (1987)—is oddly truncated and unsatisfying.

Instead, the film's director, James Isaac, appears more inspired by action-oriented Western-style shoot-outs set in broad daylight. There's a gun fight, for instance, between bad werewolves and good werewolves in a quaint little small town called Huguenot that involves—*I kid you not*—a pistol-packing werewolf granny. Nana's just walking her grandchild across the avenue, minding her own business, until, when confronted with the enemy, she pulls a HUGE gun out of her pocketbook and opens fire like a pro. As she lays dying of (silver) bullet wounds, Granny's final shot targets a gas station and blows it up.

Don't mess with Nana.

The film's obsessive focus on gunfights, often sped-up or slowed-down so as to appear “stylish,” isn't necessarily a horrible thing given the ignoble recent history of werewolf-themed horror films (*Underworld*, *Cursed*, *An American Werewolf in Paris*). And honestly, even though the late Stan Winston was tangentially involved in this film's production, I can't blame the director for shorting the werewolf footage as much as he does: the creature make-up for the beasts is absolutely dreadful, and probably some of the worst seen onscreen since *Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf* (1985), so focusing on the shoot-outs make sense. Still, the town of Huguenot looks like the NRA's wet dream for America, since everybody packs heat, and in broad daylight, to boot.

It takes a good werewolf with a gun to stop a bad werewolf with a gun, I guess.

In terms of narrative, *Skinwalkers* is the tale of an old, mystical prophecy fulfilled. There's a long-standing legend in Skinwalker circles that a young boy—when he turns 13 years old—will find a cure for the “curse” of the Skinwalker. The beasts will know this cure is imminent because the full moon in the night sky will turn blood red.

Only problem: some Skinwalkers don't want to be cured. Instead, having fed on human blood (which is like a drug to an addict, according to the script), they wish to continue their endless nocturnal orgies of violence and hot biker sex.

And frankly, who can blame them for that?

In essence, the film pits a town full of restrained, upright-citizen werewolves, against a motorcycle

gang of lusty werewolves, led by hunky Varek (Roswell's Jason Behr). The good werewolves protect the messianic boy, Timothy Talbot (Matthew Knight). The bad werewolves want him dead and are running out of time to kill him since the moon has already gone crimson. The whole good skinwalker versus bad skinwalker battle comes as something of a shock to Tim's widowed mother, Rachel, played by a very lost-looking Rhona Mitra.

Poor Rachel! You know you're not the sharpest tool in the shed when everybody in your town is a werewolf except for you (given to straitjacketing themselves EVERY NIGHT during the period of the full moon) and you never pick up on it.

Still, as ridiculous as this all sounds, there remains something borderline intriguing about *Skinwalkers*. At its most basic level, the film concerns a conflict inside *human* nature, not monster nature. We all wage a continuing battle whether to fight our urges or to give in to them. And the film, shorn of all the horror imagery, sub-textually concerns a wayward, bad father—having succumbed to something like drug addiction, alcohol and infidelity—finally returning to the family fold. I wish I could state that these notions are dramatized with a high degree of nuance or subtlety, or even the tiniest degree of charm. But *Skinwalkers*, for the most part, is wretchedly awful.

If nothing else, audiences may admire *Skinwalkers*' bold ambition. It's a film that opens up in *media res*, in the middle of a much larger saga about Skinwalker nature, politics and history. One gets the feeling you're coming into a literary epic or something, and that some degree of intelligent thought was indeed put into the larger sweep; even if you only get to see this dumb, trashy piece of the myth.

You know what *Skinwalkers* really feels like?

The pilot for a TV series that never aired. There are an abundance of subplots and characters, none of them excavated very ably, but which—over the span of weeks or months—could easily be the fodder for some interesting viewing. There's one subplot about a kindly werewolf protector, Jonas (Elias Koteas), who is forced to give up his adult daughter (also a skinwalker) to Caleb and the evil motorcycle gang. She returns as a traitor and a junkie, having tasted human blood, and there's some opportunity for pathos and good character moments here.

Unfortunately, this aspect of *Skinwalkers* last about five minutes; and the movie is nearly two hours long. Other scenes are baffling and tonally wrong. For instance, there's one scene wherein 13-year-old Timmy hits on an attractive nurse in a really obnoxious, sexually aggressive way and all the adults seem to enjoy the moment, as if it is a rite of passage, instead of a pervy moment, and one that is inappropriate.

By the time the film winds it's meandering, moonlit way to the uninspiring, derivative final narration ("*For some I am salvation, for other ... destruction*") you wonder what the hell you're watching.

I can draw only conclusion from this enterprise: It takes a village ... of werewolves ... to raise a child.

Sunshine * * * *

Critical Reception

"The film's 2001: A Space Odyssey sense of the epic is grounded by a formula familiar from films like *Event Horizon* and *Mission to Mars*, but mostly like *Alien*, in which a domino cascade of bad luck causes people to die, and whose zombie chase down dark corridors seems like a *28 Days Later* homage. However, *Sunshine* is not a pale imitation of these other films, but an explosive and kinetic variation of them."—Duane Dudek, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*: "Lost in space; *Sunshine* dazzles visually but generates little warmth," July 27, 2007, page E3.

"From future Oscar-winner Danny Boyle, *Sunshine* hopes to pay homage to the definitive space tales (*Alien*, 2001: A Space Odyssey), but instead turns into a derivative, garbled hodgepodge that changes course more often than the ship holding our protagonists. At least Boyle steals from the best; the ingenious-but-benevolent computer protects the ship's inhabitants, unlike psychotic HAL from 2001 or duplicitous

MOTHER from *Alien*. A phantom killer hitchhikes aboard like the antagonist in *Alien*. In the final reel, our astronauts discover a beautiful, lightshow finale like in *2001*.

Visually, the world Boyle paints is remarkable. The space station with its towers and metal bridges is so crisp that you can close your eyes and imagine running across them. The sun, on its last breath, is an image of lost luster, yet still with remnants of its intense power.

Boyle could have saved 20th Century-Fox \$40 million and just sent everyone DVD copies of *Alien* and *2001* instead and spent the time polishing his mantle for the Oscar gold he would score for his next picture, *Slumdog Millionaire*.”—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Cliff Curtis (Searle); Chipo Chung (Icarus); Cillian Murphy (Richard Capa); Michelle Yeoh (Corazon); Hiroyuki Sanada (Kaneda); Rose Byrne (Cassie); Benedict Wong (Trey); Chris Evans (Mace); Troy Garity (Harvey); Mark Strong (Pinbacker); Paloma Baeza (Capa's Sister).

CREW: Casting: Donna Isaacson, Gail Stevens. Production Designer: Mark Tildesley. Costume Designer: Suttirat Anne Larlarb. Special Effects: MPC, Richard Conway. Music: John Murphy. Director of Photography: Alwin Kuchler. Film Editing: Chris Gill. Producer: Andrew MacDonald. Written by: Alex Garland. Directed by: Danny Boyle. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 2057, *Icarus 2*, a massive spaceship bound for the sun and carrying eight fragile human beings aboard, has been tasked with dropping a vast stellar bomb in hopes of re-igniting the dying star before it fades out and leaves Earth a frozen, destroyed world. En route to the sun, however, as the ship enters a communications “dead zone,” the crew of *Icarus 2* intercepts a mysterious signal. The signal originates near Mercury, from *Icarus 1*, the first ship that attempted this mission some seven years earlier but disappeared without a trace. It too carries a massive stellar bomb, and thus offers the crew of *Icarus 2* twice the possibility of success on their critical mission. Though some crew members disagree with the decision, the captain of *Icarus 2*, Kaneda (Sanada), orders a course adjustment on the recommendation of ship's physicist Capa (Murphy). Their mission: to secure a second payload. Unfortunately, a madman lays in wait on *Icarus 1*.

COMMENTARY: 1981, the Sean Connery/“High Noon in Space” sci-fi movie *Outland* was advertised with the memorable tag line: “*Even in Space, the Ultimate Enemy is Man.*” A deliberate homage to classic outer space films from *Solaris* (1972) and *Dark Star* (1975) to *Alien* (1979) and Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* (2007) could have re-purposed the same slogan.

Because if all the technical bells and whistles are removed, the harrowing *Sunshine* concerns not the final frontier, but the yin-and-yang of the human psyche; the best and worst angels of our nature. *Just how far would you be willing to go to save the human race?* To the surface of Sun? And where would that journey take you, spiritually-speaking? Would it lead you to an epiphany about yourself, or contrarily, and like a character in the film named Pinbacker, to the very heart of darkness itself?

To put it another way, would you curse the blackness and loneliness of space, or share in the glowing illumination and belonging of a radiant star, even if you knew such belonging was short-lived?

Sunshine offers a surprising and terrifying glimpse of human psychology, of man both at his remarkable best and at his absolute worst. Catastrophic human errors jeopardize the critical space mission and yet egregious instances of human heroism—and *selflessness*—pull the mission back from the precipice over and over. In one torturous, edge-of-your seat sequence, three crew members traverse a gap in space (between airlocks) with only one space suit between them. In another tense scene, one committed astronaut, Mace (Chris Evans), dives headlong into freezing liquid to re-start a computer mainframe. When he can't do the job at first, he goes back into the coolant again. And when he still doesn't finish, he goes back in a third time at the promise of great bodily harm.

On the opposite side of the equation is a man called Pinbacker who believes that if humanity dies, he will be “alone” with God. He believes, one must suppose, that there will be some sense of intimacy

there, in that twisted relationship. That's the mission he's assumed, and it involves murder, sabotage, and chaos. Pinbacker is consumed with self while the survivors on *Icarus 2* are consumed with saving the planet and the species.

These are two diametrically opposed viewpoints, and yet both are human.

The battle between these opposing aspects of the human psyche leads right to the surface of the Sun itself and beyond, into a beautiful, even transcendent metaphysical climax. And Boyle doesn't spare viewers any comforts on the trip. Characters who the audience grows to love make agonizing sacrifices, face grotesque and gory deaths, and broach a suicide mission with the dignity one would hope we would find evidence if, by chance (or bad luck), we found ourselves in their shoes.

In *Sunshine*, Danny Boyle has crafted an intimate, haunting, and utterly believable space movie, one that is never cheesy, trite, or less than totally involving (not to mention anxiety-provoking). And while you're watching, be certain not to take your eyes off the screen even for a second, especially during one unsettling scene that creepily employs nearly subliminal flash cuts.

Boyle revived and re-energized the zombie genre with *28 Days Later* (2002), and *Sunshine* is strong enough that it should have also re-ignited the cerebral outer space film. An aficionado of the genre will recognize and appreciate many of Boyle's tributes to genre greats of yesteryear too. The film's villain, Pinbacker, is named after *Dark Star's* Sgt. Pinback (Dan O'Bannon), and even the *Icarus's* mission—*deploying a destructive device: a bomb*—reflects that nihilist John Carpenter classic. Boyle's slow, majestic pans across empty and isolating high-tech ship corridors deliberately evoke memories of the *Nostromo* and Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). And the talking computer Icarus may be the *Nostromo's* "Mother" or *2001's* HAL. Even the steadfast focus on human psychology reminds one of *Solaris*.

Boyle utilizes these references and homages not as gimmicks or nudges to appreciative fans, but in the very manner Quentin Tarantino might: *re-directing them for his own unique story* and making certain that they carry significance for viewers beyond their original context. For instance, any time a talking computer appears in a space horror film, we expect certain *things* to happen. HAL, Proteus (*Demon Seed*) and Mother all turned out to be treacherous "beings," after all. Boyle plays with that anticipation in a unique way, particularly in a scene that involves the captain of the ship and Capa embarking on a dangerous spacewalk. As for the Ridley-Scott-esque pans, these carefully orchestrated shots serve to remind viewers of a few important things. First, of the technological nature of the shelter that houses this group of human beings; and secondly that—in *this case*—the haunted house in space is not one invaded by a nightmarish "*outside force*," a malevolent extra-terrestrial, but rather a monster direct from the human id; a flawed man.

Sunshine is also highly reminiscent of the literary works of Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), which are considered, to varying degrees, inspiration for films as diverse as *Alien* and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). As is the case in Conrad's works, *Sunshine* offers a tangible sense of place (the *Icarus 2* could be the *Nostromo* or the *Narcissus* of Conrad's travels), and characters' fates are played out in a remote location (stellar orbit) far from the lights of modern civilization. Another Conrad-ian theme, the Evil "Outside" creating an Evil "Inside," also finds purposeful life in the Boyle film. Pinbacker goes insane because of the "loneliness" of black space, and also, perhaps, because of his religious upbringing. Those evils "outside" Pinbacker grow an evil seed within him; one that germinates on the long voyage to the Sun.

The 2000s represents a great time to revisit the nature of religious zealotry. It was just such a fervor, after all, that was behind the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The terrorists there believed they would be rewarded by God for their murderous actions on Earth. Pinbacker, who would destroy the Earth and all its inhabitants for a solo audience with God, is cut from the same cloth, with similar motives.

Sunshine is a remarkable outer space horror movie because it is about us, not clones, robots or monsters. When Man finally reaches the stars, he may have to reckon with the clones, the robots and the monsters of space opera too, but one thing is for certain: *he will certainly have to reckon with his own psychology first*. In exploring this facet of the human experience, Boyle's film is about the darkness—and the sunshine—to be found there too.

Teeth (DTV) * * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jess Weixler (Dawn); John Hensley (Brad); Josh Pais (Dr. Godfrey); Hale Appleman (Tobey); Lenny von Dohlen (Bill); Vivienne Benesch (Kim); Ashley Springer (Ryan); Julia Garro (Gwen); Nicole Swahn (Melanie); Adam Wagner (Phil); Hunter Ulvog (Little Brad); Ava Ryen Plumb (Little Dawn); Trent Moore (Mr. Vincent); Mike Yager (Elliot); Nathan Parson (Spritzer). Taylor Sheppard (Sex Ed Instructor).

CREW: Roadside Attractions and Pierpoline Films present *Teeth*. Production Designer: Paul Avery. Costume Designer: Rita Ryack. Special Effects: TextFX, Final Light. Music: Robert Miller. Director of Photography: Wolfgang Held. Film Editor: Joe Landauer. Producers: Mitchell Lichtenstein, Joyce Pierpoline. Written and Directed by: Mitchell Lichtenstein. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Dawn (Weixler), a teenage member of the Christian cult, “The Promise,” which preaches abstinence, learns that her vagina has sharp teeth. When a male member of the organization attempts to rape her, those teeth bite off his penis. At first terrified, Dawn begins to learn more about the vagina dentata and its power, all while contending with a perverted stepbrother, and a sick mother.

COMMENTARY: *Teeth* is a biting (sorry...) reminder that women have been told, from time immemorial, that they are evil by their very nature (and therefore biology).

According to Christian mythology, the first woman, Eve, is the culprit in man’s expulsion from the paradise of the Garden of Eden.

According to Homer’s *The Iliad*, the beautiful Helen is the cause of the Trojan War.

More recently, in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump, who has been accused by several women of sexual assault, won the White House, after calling his opponent, Hillary Clinton, a “*nasty woman*” in a televised debate. Trump’s divorces, his bankruptcies, and his alleged harassment of women did not deny him the Presidency. By contrast, Clinton was denied the office, and treated as untrustworthy by the mainstream media, because she used—*wait for it*—a private e-mail server while serving as a government official.

Double standard, anyone?

So, given this long-held anti-woman belief, in religion, literature and civic discourse, is it any surprise that some women have come to believe, in fact, that they are evil? Or that their bodies are evil? This is especially true if women have been indoctrinated into ignorance about their bodies, by male-run programs such as “abstinence only” education.

Consider: what is the real message of abstinence-only education? That men are so afraid of women and their bodies that to educate women about their own bodies would be, well, a sin? It’s better to be uneducated about your body, this type of education suggests, than to be fully informed about biology, health, and safe sex.

It’s actually worse than that, as *Teeth* knowingly explores.

Abstinence-only programs like “the Promise,” devoted to notion of young women remaining chaste until marriage, suggests that women have value to society and men only so long as they keep intact “*the most precious gift of all*,” their virginity. In other words, a woman’s highest worth is correlated with her ability to keep her legs closed, in these programs. Dawn and the other young women in the program are told to “*keep your gift wrapped ... until the day you trade it in for ... that gold ring*.”

Unpack that comment and see it for what it is.

A women’s sexuality is not her own, suggests “the Promise,” but rather a gift for men. And it is the price of a transaction. *You can open up your legs but put the gold on your finger first*. To give something, you must get something in return. The whole idea is creepy, even beyond the idea of women being a present for their husbands. There’s also the idea of a woman being tethered to her father, before marriage, and not disappointing him by having sex before marriage. It’s another way of eliminating

female agency. She goes from being responsible for her father's happiness to being a gift for her husband. Yuck.

And make no mistake, *Teeth* is not exaggerating about abstinence-only education or programs like The Promise. It is an example of society preaching to women that they are wrong, or somehow evil. Dawn, in the film, must seek out knowledge and come to understand her own sexuality, free of the religious and patriarchal propaganda that has surrounded her.

In *Teeth*, the male characters are not held, quite clearly, to the same standards of "ethical" behavior as Dawn is. Tobey, also a member of the Promise, tries to rape Dawn while she is asleep. Another boy brags about making it with her to his buddies on the phone. And Dawn's stepbrother, failing to respect the cultural boundaries of family, tries to make it with Dawn, himself. Dawn is supposed to remain chaste, pure and honorable, and yet all the men she encounters have no such qualms or interests.

And, accordingly, they get their dicks bit off by the vagina dentata.

This punishment, severing of the male member, is part of an intriguing thematic reversal in *Teeth*. For years, horror movies have made jokes about women and virgins, specifically about how hard it is to find a real virgin in this day and age. In the 2000s *Cherry Falls* dealt with the concept. In 2012, a joke in *Cabin in the Woods* had Sigourney Weaver noting that she has to work with what she gets, in relation to finding virgins for an important blood sacrifice to ancient gods. Here, *Teeth* inverts that paradigm and makes a number of jokes about how difficult it is to find a man who actually loves and appreciate Dawn. Instead, she keeps running into quasi-rapists and other guys who just want to fuck her as a kind of trophy.

In each case, the vagina bites back.

Men will find this material difficult. *Teeth* features shot of crabs walking blithely over a severed penis in the woods. And there is a moment late in the film in which a hungry dog wolfs down another severed penis. It's not easy to watch. But again, it's an important inversion. Many horror films use violence against women as a key visualization. *Teeth* puts men on the chopping block, in a most uncomfortable way.

Teeth is Dawn's heroic journey. Although, in the film, Dawn believes at first that she must find a hero who can conquer her toothed vagina, Dawn comes to see that she is the master of her own life, and her body, and desires too. To come to that reckoning, she has to overcome the programming of her anti-woman religious cult, and American society at large. In this way, the movie is about self-realization. Education, of course, is the way she arrives at that apex. She conducts web searches, and, well, primary or field research too.

Teeth snaps sharply at its targets, and recognizes how "*primitive masculine dread of the mysteries of women*" go unquestioned in our culture, even in the 2000s. It does so in a funny, and very uncomfortable way.

Them (DTV) * * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Olivia Bonamy (Clémentine); Michaël Cohen (Lucas); Adrianna Moca (Ilona); Maria Roman (Sanda); Camelia Maxim (Maria); Alexandru Boghiu (Child); Emanuel Stăfanuc, Horia Ioan, Ștefan Cornic, George Iulian (Adolescents).

CREW: Eskwad, StudioCanal, Castel Film Romania, Canal+, CineCinema, Dark Sky Films, and Slowhand Cinema Releasing present *Them*. Casting: Floriela Grapini, Guillaume Moulin. Costume Designer: Elisabeth Mehu. Special Effects: Melani Ciurlin, Ionel Popa. Music: René-Marc Bini. Director of Photography: Axel Cosnefroy. Film Editing: Nicolas Sarkissian. Producer: Richard Grandpierre. Executive Producer: Frédéric Doniguan. Written and Directed by: David Moreau, Xavier Palud. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 77 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Clémentine (Olivia Bonamy), a French instructor who has recently moved to Bucharest, Romania, teaches at the French Junior High School. *She's been away from home, in France*, for three months and still having difficulties with the transition to a different country. One weekend, she leaves school, drives home to a dilapidated and vast country estate, and meets her partner, Lucas (Michaël Cohen), a writer. They spend a happy night at home together until approximately 3:45 a.m., when both Lucas and Clémentine are awakened from their slumber by strange and disturbing noises outside. Before their eyes, Clémentine's car is stolen and driven right off the premises. And then, a gaggle of mysterious assailants in hooded sweatshirts invade the house and begin playing chilling games: flipping on and off the television, turning on the water spigot in the bathroom faucet, and so on. As the siege continues, Clémentine realizes her students are responsible, and that they aren't playing games.

COMMENTARY: Sometimes, a skillful return to basics can be *refreshing*. Now and then, the scariest films are those with the most direct and unfettered narratives; boasting the least amount of character soap opera and featuring almost no reliance on digital creations or other special effects. The French shocker *Them* takes that hint, and it's a breath of fresh—and intoxicating—air. The film is simple and elegant, and it will terrify audiences to the core. This film from directors David Moreau and Xavier Palud is a streamlined, throat-tightening exercise in pure suspense; essentially a sustained 75-minute siege and chase. The terror escalates to a frenzy, and that frenzy is masterfully sustained and honed right through the denouement and a revelatory, perfectly executed pull-back.

Them's visual style is distinctive and effective, a not-too-unsteady-cam approach that simultaneously telegraphs vulnerability and immediacy. The film makes strong use of atypical illumination sources: car headlights, flashlights, and the glare of the television, for example. Often, these are the only light sources in scenes, granting the film a dark, earthy, *cinéma vérité* texture. One elaborate scare sequence set in the expansive attic—involving draped plastic sheets and a high hatchway on the wall chillingly recalls a moment from Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) but not in an overly derivative way.

Them's final sequence, a race and pursuit through a subterranean, labyrinthian tunnel system, is brilliantly staged too. This sequence bears comparison to the frenetic closing minutes of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Like that sequence, *Them's* climax features total immersion, identification and nail-biting uncertainty. You're in the dark, where a string of hanging light bulbs only seem to operate intermittently, alone, and you don't know what to expect around the next corner. *But somewhere, up ahead, you loved one is screaming bloody murder.*

Straightforward and spare (and even adopting the “based on a true story” title card), *Them* also serves as a fascinating reflection of French culture and the times. One reviewer, for instance, viewed the film as a response to France’s admission into the European Union and the fear of “barbaric” Romanians.

Corry Cropper and Marc Olivier write in *Lingua Romana*: “*The film emphasizes the technological and cultural backwardness of Romania: phones are unreliable, television programming is poor and in black and white, the police force is unresponsive and the food is bad. Like the house Lucas and Clémentine live in, Romania is dilapidated and in serious need of repair.*”²⁶

One must wonder, too, if the film doesn’t concern, to some extent, the social/civil unrest in France ca. 2005–2006. Riots broke out in the streets—across the country—after a handful of youngsters were killed in a power plant while evading police pursuit. The riots involved the burning and destruction of automobiles, and cars certainly play an important part in the action of *Them*, as do youngsters. The riots were later blamed by some on France’s large Muslim population and so the sub-text here seems to concern French uneasiness about cultural assimilation; and about their role of reduced importance in the world: both in Romania, perhaps, and at home. Xenophobia is a key aspect of the War on Terror Age, often seen through an American lens. In *Them*, that horror of the “other” is expressed in terms of what Donald Rumsfeld called “*Old Europe*,” and France in particular.

In the end, such interpretation is interesting but unimportant to an enjoyment of the film. *Them* boasts a simple and admirable agenda: *to scare you to death*. By and large, to coin a phrase, mission accomplished. *Them* starts strong with a carefully crafted gag involving the open hood of a car and it doesn’t relent even a little until its final revelatory pull-back and retraction; the last word, perhaps in symbolizing visual entrapment.

The film’s coda, which exposes the true nature of the killers and explains the strange “clicking” sound that marks their presence, is a genius twist; one that will inspire in audiences either outrage, outright admiration, or macabre laughter.

Maybe all three at once, actually.

Children are such successful and powerful avatars of terror because they always represent tomorrow, the future. If the children of today are lawless, wanton murderers, without respect for authority, tradition, or moral norms, what kind of future is possible?

The xenophobic angle adds even more. These children belong to a society outside the safety of old Europe, and yet civilized Western culture is expected to assimilate them? How is such a thing even possible. Clementine’s final entrapment is a symbol of such xenophobia, a reckoning that there is no escape from this dramatic crisis.

The old estate that is the central setting of the film is a symbol, perhaps, of old Europe, or the West in general. It is falling apart, in terms of infrastructure, and the enemy is already here, already inside the house, looking to exploit its weaknesses to gain entrance, and advantage.

This idea may be paranoid, but is certainly xenophobic, and therefore a perfect reflection of the aughts.

30 Days of Night * * * *

Critical Reception

“There’s not a moment of camp humor in this striking, excruciatingly scary vision. Slade’s vision of a town under siege conjures a mood of apocalyptic anxiety.”—Colin Covert, *Star Tribune*: “Rough night: Alaska town is besieged by vampires for *30 Days of Night*,” October 18, 2002, page 26.

“You come to this film expecting rock and roll’ what you get instead is heavy-metal muzak.”—Tom Long, *Detroit News*: “*30 Days*: Typical kill-fest,” March 19, 2007, page F2.

“For a while, *30 Days of Night* seizes our attention like a meth-addicted party crasher.... But the waiting games, decoy attacks and unbearably shrill sound effects grow tiresome long before the fat lady sings ‘Here Comes the Sun.’”—Joe Williams, McClatchy—*Tribune Business News*, October 19, 2007.

CAST: Josh Hartnett (Eben Oleson); Melissa George (Stella Oleson); Danny Huston (Marlow); Ben Foster (The Stranger); Mark Boone Junior (Beau Brower); Mark Rendall (Jake Oleson); Amber Sainsbury (Denise); Manu Bennett (Billy Kitka); Megan Franich (Iris); Joel Tobek (Doug); Elizabeth Hawthorne (Lucy Ikos); Nathaniel Lees (Carter Davies); Craig Hall (Wilson Bulosan); Chic Littlewood (Isaac Bulosan); Peter Feeney (John Ris); Min Windle (Ally Riis); Camille Keenan (Kirsten Toomey); Jack Walley (Peter Toomey); Elizabeth McRae (Helen Munson); Joe Dekkers-Reihana (Tom Melanson); Scott Taylor (Paul Jayko); Abbey-May Wakefield (Little Girl Vampire).

CREW: Columbia Pictures, Ghost House Pictures, and Dark Horse Entertainment present *30 Days of Night*. Casting: Allison Meadows, Liz Mullane, Mary Vernieu. Production Designer: Paul Denham Austerberry. Costume Designer: Jane Holland. Special Effects: Weta Workshop, Weta Digital. Music: Brian Reitzell. Director of Photography: Jo Willems. Film Editor: Art Jones. Producers: Sam Raimi, Rob Tapert. Executive Producers: Joe Drake, Aubrey Henderson, Nathan Kahane, Mike Richardson. Based on the graphic novel by: Steve Niles, Ben Templesmith. Written by: Steve Niles, Stuart Beattie, and Brian Nelson. Directed by: David Slade. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 117 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Barrow, Alaska, the townspeople buckle down for thirty long days without sunlight. Some denizens leave town for the duration, while others prepare for thirty days of night, gathering food and other supplies of the long dark. Overseeing the transition to this “*last day of sun*” is Sheriff Eben Oleson (Hartnett), who, with his estranged wife, the town fire marshal, Stella (George), is forced to contend with an invasion. A group of Russian vampires infiltrate the town and—freed by the lack of sunlight—feast on the remaining townspeople for the duration of the month. Unexpectedly, Eben must now defend Barrow from the attack of the strong, brutal creatures of the night.

COMMENTARY: Based on the popular graphic novel miniseries by Steve Niles, *30 Days of Night* features one of the best premises in horror film history: a town in the Arctic facing vampires while on the cusp of a “polar night,” a time of limited sunlight, and pervasive, impenetrable night.

The idea of vampires feeding on humans in a world of perpetual blackness is a great scenario, and the film makes the most of it. Bolstered by strong performances from Hartnett and George, *30 Days of Night* is a siege film like *Rio Bravo* (1959) that, once upon a time, might have been directed by John Carpenter. Accordingly, this 2007 film follows in the tradition of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), and even this decade’s *Ghosts of Mars* (2001). *30 Days of Night* follows a small group of survivors locked down basically in one locale (here an ice-bound town), dealing with the onslaught of a murderous horde. Even *John Carpenter’s The Thing* (1982) is a point of reference here, in terms of setting, and specific incidents, and it too is an example of a siege picture.

Let’s go back to *Rio Bravo* for a moment. Although it is a Western, it should also be remembered as a movie title that has had a remarkably significant and outsized impact on the horror genre. The film, helmed by Carpenter’s favorite director, Howard Hawks, involves a small western town with an ethical, stand-up guy as sheriff, John T. Chance (John Wayne). Chance becomes involved in a conflict when a wealthy rancher, Burdette, wants his son, accused of murder, released from Chance’s jail. But Chance believes in the law, not the entitlement of the wealthy, and refuses to release him. In response, Burdette seals off the town from the outside world, and sends in hired killers to lay siege to it. Chance has few allies, besides an independent woman named Feathers (Angie Dickinson), an elderly man, Stumpy (Walter Brennan), a recovering alcoholic, Dude (Dean Martin), and a quick-draw kid, Colorado (Ricky Nelson). Together, this motley crew fights the professional killers and repels the invaders.

30 Days of Night restages many of these classic elements for its siege story. Eben is, like Chance, the town sheriff. He is aided by his wife, an independent, capable sort, who fills in for Feathers, although with the modern twist that the couple is having marital difficulties. The vampires, of course, represent the hired killers, coming from outside to threaten the town. There’s even a vampire, substituting for Burdette’s son, who spends time in *30 Days of Night* in the town jail cell. Perhaps most importantly, both

films are set in a frontier. It's the Old West in Hawks' film, and the Arctic, about to go into the aforementioned polar night (really a polar month), in *30 Days of Night*. Both films have a penchant for what might accurately be termed Hawksian dialogue too: tough, laconic, hard-boiled words and expressions. "Hell of a day." "Just you wait." That sort of thing.

Both films also concern, in a very real sense, notions about freedom, and freedom in America. In *Rio Bravo*, John T. Chance knows that the law is what makes people free: the fair, just application of the law. If America can't manage that, then there is anarchy. Therefore, nobody, not even the rich, is above the law. Alaska is a right-leaning, libertarian-leaning state in America, and in *30 Days of Night*, freedom is not a remote topic. "Isn't that why we live out here ... a little freedom?" a character asks.

The frontier, as dangerous as it may seem, whether in the Old West, or in modern Alaska on the cusp of polar night, is a crucible where American ideals, such as freedom, are tested. In the 2000s, of course, this idea was once more coruscating in the national bloodstream. In the War on Terror, according to President Bush, the terrorists wanted to take away our freedoms, make us cower in fear. What better place to test the idea of freedom than Alaska, on the "last day of the sun."

Read in this fashion, *30 Days of Night* is clearly about a foreign invasion, a terrorist attack on an outpost of freedom and democracy, vetted in the post-9/11 milieu. When faced with this invasion, the people of Barrow, people like Eben, are called on to make sacrifices; sacrifices in blood.

There is no traditional happy ending here, which is, this author believes, a reflection of how the culture had changed between 1959 and 2007, with the intervening fact being, simply, the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Accordingly, the film treats the action in the town as if it is war zone footage. At one point, the camera adopts a high-angle, drone's eye (God's eye?) view of the town, and we see fires, abandoned vehicles, and field combatants. This very modern view of "war" reflects the age in which the film was made and would have felt right at home in *Black Hawk Down* (2001) or any other combat film of the decade.

In addition to restaging the structure, characters and narrative of *Rio Bravo*, *30 Days of Night* shares a lot in common with Carpenter's *The Thing*. The films share an isolated, icy setting, where help is unavailable. The people of Outpost 31 are cut off from assistance and humanity, and so are the people of Barrow. Both films feature dogs being murdered by the invading force, removing man's best friend as an ally. In both films, helicopters are sabotaged, so that technology, similarly, can't be used to seek reinforcement. And just like the radio in *The Thing*, which is destroyed by Blair, those at the police station in Barrow report that the computers are down, and phones are out too.

And finally, in a deep way, both films seem to concern personal alienation. In *The Thing*, there is a crippling lack of trust among the men at the Antarctic research base. "Trust is a hard thing to come by these days," says pilot MacReady (Kurt Russell). In *30 Days of Night*, Eben and Stella are estranged, unable to reconcile their marriage, on the verge of separation and alienated from one another. There is even, in the film, a discussion of "God. No God," which is sort of the ultimate form of man's alienation from one another. The things such as religion that bind communities together (in *Rio Bravo*: the equal application of law) are not working in Barrow; just as they did not function in Carpenter's *The Thing*.

Intriguingly, the film follows in the "it takes evil to fight evil" tradition of the 2000s. In short, this means that America, in fighting the terrorists behind 9/11, often got down to the terrorists' level: atrocities at Abu Ghraib, permanent detainment in Guantanamo Bay, and pre-emptive war in Iraq. In *30 Days of Night*, Eben willingly injects himself with vampire blood, so that he can become a monster. He must become what he despises. That is the sacrifice he makes, to save his town and his family. He makes the same choice that America made as a nation: *to defeat a monster, one must become a monster*. The price of freedom is sacrifice, according to this film, but also the sacrifice of a morality held in peacetime.

One must wonder how John T. Chance would view Eben's decision.

Seen in light of its historical predecessors, *Rio Bravo* and *The Thing*, *30 Days of Night* is a remarkable film because it reflects the past so clearly, and yet also speaks to the decade in which it was made.

As the *Saw* movies make plain, this is a decade in which one might survive, but not without losing

something; not without tragedy or pain. In *30 Days of Night*, Eben loses his life, after reconciling with Stella, and she loses her husband. They share a triumphant sunrise, which also harkens his death (because he has been turned into a vampire), but that moment of victory is fleeting. The ideals of freedom, faith and community—all ideas roiling both *Rio Bravo* and *The Thing*—are countenanced in *30 Days of Night*, a decade in which those questions faced America at large, in the War on Terror. In that age, America was under siege by foreign attackers, and darkness seemed to permeate every corner of the country's psyche. The light was a long way distant, for many years, and our enemies seemed barbarous (like some terrorists, the vampires in the film insist on decapitation, or beheading their victims). Many Americans wondered if, after 9/11, we had seen "our last day in the sun," or we were "so helpless against what's coming."

30 Days of Night reminds the viewer that though darkness falls, a sunrise awaits. Not all of us will make it to that daylight, however.

28 Weeks Later * * *

Critical Reception

"There isn't much acting here, but there is entirely too much vomiting..."—Rex Reed, *Observer*, June 20, 2007.

"The parallels with Iraq are so bald, they don't require spelling out—though it's interesting that London should play this world's end role again, so soon after *Children of Men*. Given the deeply cynical end, you could twist this political allegory more ways than one, but fear would seem to be an appropriate response."—Tom Charrity, *CNN.com*: "28 Weeks Later thrillingly effective," May 11, 2007.

"The director's reins have been turned over to the flashy young Spaniard Juan Carlos Fresnadillo (*Intacto*), who may have Iraq in the back of his mind but is primarily interested in scaring the beejesus out of the audience. He's abandoned the grungy video look of the original for Enrique Chediak's gorgeous, more expensive-looking cinematography, and whenever there's a zombie attack (there are many), the editing goes into the cinematic equivalent of an epileptic fit..."—David Ansen, *Newsweek*: "Ansen on 28 Weeks," May 10, 2007.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Robert Carlyle (Don); Rose Byrne (Scarlet); Jeremy Renner (Doyle); Harold Perrineau (Flynn); Catherine McCormack (Alice); Idris Elba (Stone); Imogene Poots (Tammmy); Mackintosh Muggleton (Andy); Amanda Walker (Sally); Shahid Ahmed (Jacob); Garfield Morgan (Geoff); Emily Beecham (Karen); Beans El-Balawi (Boy in Cottage); Meghan Oopiel (DLR Soldier); Stewart Alexander (Military Officer).

CREW: 20th Century-Fox, Fox Atomic, DNA Films, UK Film Council, Fingerprint Films, Sogecine and Koane Films present 28 Weeks Later. Casting: Shaheen Baig. Production Designer: Mark Tildesley. Costume Designer: Jane Petrie. Special Effects: Creature Effects, Rising Sun Pictures, Animal Kogical, Rainmaker, The Mill, The Senate Visual Effects, Chocolate Lab, Framstore CFC, Prime Focus. Music: John Murphy. Director of Photography: Enrique Chediak. Film Editing: Chris Gill. Producers: Enrique Lopez Lavigne, Andrew Macdonald, Allan Reich. Executive Producers: Danny Boyle, Alex Garland. Written by: Rowan Joffe, Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, E.L. Lavigne, Jesus Olmo. Directed by: Juan Carlos Fresnadillo. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: 28 weeks after the deadly rage virus outbreak, NATO forces occupy London. An American soldier, Doyle (Renner), is among those guarding a safe zone, as families are brought in to re-settle the area. He befriends a doctor, Scarlet (Byrne), and together they help the locals, even as an infected man, Don (Carlyle), carries the disease back into the open.

COMMENTARY: The terrific 2002 zombie-style 28 Days Later didn't require a sequel. It was brilliant, involving, socially relevant, and entirely tormenting all on its own. However, the follow-up film from Juan Carlos Fresnadillo is a worthy continuation of the story. More than that, the harrowing sequel fulfills the highest aesthetic criteria of any film project: it reflects to an often-alarming degree the turbulent times in which it was produced. So, like its predecessor, this is a horror movie sequel that is both scary *and* relevant.

After a bloody, fast-moving prologue set during the apex of the rage virus in England, the period covered in the original Boyle film, the movie jumps forward the titular 28 weeks to a span when the plague is quelled, and British citizens are slowly being repatriated to an abandoned London. Specifically, American soldiers have moved into the eerily quiescent metropolis and been tasked with the impossible: reconstruction of an entire country. They also safeguard "The Green Zone" (or District 1), where 15,000 healthy civilians await the final cleanup of the surrounding areas so they can resume their interrupted lives. Outside the green zone are rats, wild dogs, and contaminated food and water.

Quite plainly, the sub-text of *28 Weeks Later*—released in 2007—is the U.S.'s nation-building effort in Iraq, and the difficult nature of the American post-war occupation. The dormant "rage virus" in the film is the equivalent of the Iraqi insurgency in reality. And like that insurgency, the plague is believed (wrongly) by the Americans to have suffered its "last throes."

To the contrary, however, it returns more powerfully than ever. This fact throws all of London and the American forces into absolute chaos, necessitating a "surge" of firepower which consists of indiscriminate fire bombing, poison gas, and even a deliberate massacre of civilians. In the end, there are too few American forces to contain the disaster, and it expands—in a *horrifying epilogue*—to France.

The careful viewer may also detect a few resonances of the post-Katrina disaster in *28 Weeks Later*, as innocent civilians become trapped in various buildings while outside them disaster multiplies. Despite this particular connection, the film nonetheless draws the strongest energy from its examination of American military might and the limits of that power. One of the film's central characters, an American soldier named Doyle (Jeremy Renner), stops seeing the civilians as "targets" and starts viewing them as people. After being ordered to kill civilians, he breaks rank and goes to the aid of a handful of civilians. Far from being a "*bad apple*" (which is how the Bush people termed the torturers at Abu Ghraib), Doyle is most definitely a "*good apple*." He doesn't lose sight of his humanity, he doesn't blindly follow bad orders, and he is an entirely *positive* depiction of an American soldier.

This is an enormous relief, frankly.

Doyle is young, loud and goofy, *but he's a hero too*: ready and able to do the right thing when the situation warrants it; even if it means laying down his life. This character arc honors the principle of the original film: that it is better to live and die as a human than to survive as a thug or a monster.

Indeed, the under-the-surface notion presented in *28 Weeks Later* is that "humanity"—*if given the opportunity to spread*—can ultimately prove as "contagious" as the deadly rage virus. For instance, a likable American doctor (Rose Byrne) commits to saving two children in the film—Tammy (Imogene Poots) and Andy (Mackintosh Muggleton)—and her steadfast commitment rubs off on Doyle; who then passes it on to a Special Forces Helicopter Pilot (Harold Perrineau). This leitmotif suggests a race for victory. Will rage spread faster? Or will our humanity do so?

28 Weeks Later is packed wall-to-wall with inventive conceits like that; ones that successfully distinguish it from many modern zombie brethren. The movie raises the specter, for instance, of a Rage Virus Typhoid Mary—a *carrier*—and that's an original wrinkle in the zombie apocalypse.

Also, one of the main characters here, Don (Robert Carlyle), is quickly proven a despicable coward in the film's opening passage and then presented as our lead for the next half-hour or so. Don abandons his beloved wife during a zombie attack on a farmhouse, flees the area by boat, and then makes his way to the Green Zone, where he greets his children, the aforementioned Andy and Tammy. All during these scenes, the viewer wonders: if Don is willing to abandon his own wife when the going gets tough, how is he going to protect his kids when the inevitable zombie attack comes? Ultimately, however, the use to which Don (and Carlyle himself) is put in the larger narrative proves far less innovative than that neat set-up suggests. The audience never gets the chance to see what Don would do the second time that he is

faced with death and possibly death and possibly death. Can the infection of humanity trump the infection of rage, or cowardice?

Instead, Don simply becomes an improbably long-lived rage zombie who survives one attack after another and pops up conveniently for a final scare. An intrepid film historian might consider Don a kind of homage to Bub in *Day of the Dead* (1985) or the lead zombie in *Land of the Dead* (2005) but giving the zombies a distinct leader doesn't work particularly well here. The overriding force in *28 Weeks Later* is the rising tide of chaos: the ways in which one disaster leads to another, and another. With zombies running around in great numbers, that idea is powerful enough without an identifiable "leader." The message may simply be that Don—*whether a person or a zombie*—is a "survivor." However, the ease with which this single, unarmed zombie out-lasts fire bombing, gassing, and rifle snipers simply raises too many questions in terms of believability and logistics.

One of the reasons *28 Weeks Later* succeeds for the most part is that it logically and impressively expands the scenario of *28 Days Later*, tending toward the spectacular. There are some amazing special effects in the film, particularly the firebombing of London. And one scene—involving a helicopter's massacre of attacking zombies in a field—is an impressive horror set-piece the likes of which you've probably imagined thanks to a propeller decapitation scene in *Dawn of the Dead* [1979] but never considered possible on this scale.

Juan Carlos Fresnadillo also proves capable with the more intimate "creep" sequences. A descent into a pitch-black subway makes excellent use of night vision, for instance. And Tammy and Andy's trip on a moped through abandoned, ruined London successfully evokes many historical "abandoned city" movies, from *The World, The Flesh and The Devil* (1959) to *Omega Man* (1971).

Fresnadillo chases his own tail in only one important sequence, however. When Don (now a zombie) breaks into a containment area where civilians are crowded in the dark, the film lingers on make-up that isn't that good, relies on slow-motion photography that reveals too much, and suffers from too many incoherent quick cuts. The scene is a mélange of confusion, a virtual disaster. Fortunately, this weak scene is followed by a virtuoso, nail-biting rooftop sniper sequence involving Doyle, and *28 Weeks Later* quickly regains its footing.

Overall, this is an above-average sequel to a great horror film, and that's a pretty good deal.

Vacancy * * * 1½

Critical Reception

"...grisly but gripping."—Bradley Jacobs, *Us Weekly*, April 30, 2007, page 80.

"Lean and mean, the film is an unabashedly trashy 80 minutes of pure cat-and-mouse suspense that also finds time for character development and only falters in the finale. Sure, it's no *Psycho*—Hitchcock's film is explicitly alluded to in the title sequence and Herrmannesque score—but what is? Still, with its perfectly eerie sets, stark lighting, inventive camerawork, and jarring frights, *Vacancy* comes closer than any other thriller in recent memory."—Laura Kern, *Film Comment*, July/August 2007, page 76.

"In its favor, it's got a genuinely original and creepy set-up.... Sadly, after this initial exciting set-up, *Vacancy* becomes the same old formulaic 'run-hide-someone's-jumping-out-so-the-music-goes-from-quiet-to-really-loud!' hi-jinks with no twists. Not a total loss, but disappointing that the early promise is wasted."—*The People*, August 10, 2007, page 50.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kate Beckinsale (Amy Fox); Luke Wilson (David Fox); Frank Whaley (Mason); Ethan Embry (Mechanic); Scott G. Anderson (Killer); Mark Cassella (Truck Driver); David Doty (Highway Patrolman); Norm Macdonald (Sheriff); Caryn Mower, Meegan E. Godfrey, Kym Stys, Ernie Misko, Bryan Ross (Snuff Victims); Andrew

Fiscella (Steven R.)

CREW: Screen Gems and Hal Lieberman Company present *Vacancy*. Casting: Lindsey Hayes Kroeger, David Rapaport. Production Designer: Jon Gary Steele. Costume Designer: Maya Lieberman. Special Effects: Almost Human, Zoic Studios. Music: Paul Haslinger. Director of Photography: Andrzej Sekula. Film Editor: Armen Minasian. Producer: Hal Lieberman. Executive Producers: Stacy Kolker Cramer, Glenn S. Gainor, Brian Paschal. Written by: Mark L. Smith. Directed by: Nimrod Antal. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A bickering couple on the verge of divorce, Amy (Beckinsale) and David (Wilson), take a night-time trip through rural countryside in California. They are struggling over the death of their child. Their car breaks down after a stop at an out-of-the-way gas station. With no options, they decide to spend the night at strange, filthy motel, replete with cockroaches, where a creepy hotel manager, Mason (Whaley), and two masked assailants produce snuff films with the hotel guests as the unwitting and unwilling stars. Suddenly Amy and David are forced to rely on each other if they are to survive a night of brutal attacks.

COMMENTARY: The term “Hitchcockian” is bandied about a lot in the movie reviews, sometimes by critics who weren’t alive when Hitchcock was making films and sometimes even by critics who have no idea what the term signifies. They think every thriller with a twist ending is “Hitchcockian.” For a film to appear legitimately Hitchcockian, however, it must accomplish three important goals:

1. The film should concern a key Hitchcockian obsession as an important component of the narrative. Mistaken identity (as in *North by Northwest* [1959]), sexual aberration (as in *Psycho* [1960] or *Frenzy* [1972]), and voyeurism (*Rear Window*) are three prime examples of the terrain Hitchcock charted during his career.

2. The film should be presented in a manner that Hitchcock himself would have approved of. This means that the film should be highly *formalistic* rather than realistic, expressing emotion, story, and suspense via the *mise-en-scene* and camera angles themselves. The camera should *express*, not merely record, what is happening to the characters and in the plot. For easy shorthand, this author calls this facet “form reflecting content,” but it’s really the canny understanding and deployment of film grammar; Hitchcock’s facility in crafting images that make audiences feel a certain way about the film and the people it observes on the silver screen.

3. Finally, the film should also strongly feature gallows or black humor; a sense of wit about the proceedings. In Hitchcock’s canon, death is sudden, terrifying *and* strangely funny. Consider that terrific scene in *Frenzy* (1972) when, following a murder, the potato killer outsmarts himself when he gets trapped in the back of the truck.

Given this set of principles, the 2007 thriller *Vacancy*, directed by Nimrod Antal, is clearly and boldly Hitchcockian. In terms of Hitchcockian narratives, the film echoes aspects of the Master’s canon. The out-of-the-way motel clearly evokes the Bates Motel in *Psycho*, and both managers—Norman and Mason—are anti-social characters who hide desperate secrets.



Estranged couple Amy (Kate Beckinsale) and David (Luke Wilson) face terror in the Hitchcockian horror movie *Vacancy* (2007).

Beyond that obvious connection, the idea of voyeurism runs throughout *Vacancy*. Amy and David discover that their “honeymoon suite” is packed with hidden cameras, and that Mason keeps an elaborate editing suite in his ratty little office. When the couple pops a tape in their room’s VCR, it’s a snuff film made by the killers, and so they’re watching gruesome murders occurring in the very room where they are staying. Not only is Mason a voyeur, but David and Amy are voyeurs as well. They watch the snuff tapes and—in a delightful comment on attentive movie watching—learn how to escape the killers. It is here that *Vacancy* really began to work effectively: when David behaves not like an unaware character in a stupid horror film but begins to review the horrifying films and studying the tactics of his opponents. Something monstrous and brutal (the snuff films) becomes the key to his survival.

This story development is, in fact, an argument for the validity of horror films: they have merit and worth, not, perhaps, as life survival guide, but certainly as social commentary and catharsis. This approach to the material suggests the third criterion above, a Hitchcockian sense of wit.

Overall, *Vacancy* succeeds most, however, on the second Hitchcockian principle expounded upon above. This the most difficult of the three principles to pull off, and the rarest in Hollywood films. Since the home video revolution of the late 1980s, movies have, to their detriment, grown to appear more and more like weekly TV shows. Filmmakers no longer regularly make full use of the rectangular frame; they instead depend on the TV structure of master shot, two-shot, etcetera, hoping everything is “covered” and they can fix mistakes in “post.” The result: modern movies can often look an awful lot like cop shows and lawyer shows. Much of the artistry of “film” (the understanding of film language) is missing in action.

Not so with *Vacancy*.



This motel is the scene of the crime—and many others, too—in *Vacancy* (2007).

This particular director comprehends precisely how to utilize the frame, and how to cut to reveal information about the characters and their stories in an appealing and illuminating visual fashion. For instance, early in the film, the estranged couple, in mourning over the death of their son, are seen from a camera mounted on the hood of the car. A director not so aware of imagery would have shot this sequence in traditional fashion; depicting the bickerers in the same frame together. The audience would have gotten the point from that shot, of course, but it wouldn't have been nearly as artistic.

Instead, *Vacancy's* Antal gives us *opposing* frames looking in through the windshield. Each frame features one person bisected by the outer wall of the car, and the speeding road on the opposite side of the frame. This means that when the audience is watching David, it is only watching him, and thus registering his isolation and distance from his wife, and vice-versa. In Amy's shots, the audience registers the same thing: just her head and shoulders, and speeding road. Again, it sounds like a simple thing, but the staging visually cues the viewer in to the separation between husband and wife. It's a literalization, perhaps of the idea that they've been down a long road, and that this road has separated them.

Secondly, Antal provides in his film an inordinate number of shots which literally "box in" the endangered couple, framing them inside smaller frames. The audience observes them inside the limited visual cage of a rear view or side mirror on multiple occasions during the first act. It watches them within the framed windows of an auto garage window, and within the frame of the motel room window in the honeymoon suite. The camera often gazes at them through the squares of trap doors in the floor, and hatches in the ceiling.

This frame-within-a-frame leitmotif provides the visual link to the narrative theme about voyeurism. The killers literally want to put Amy and David into a box (the TV set) and shot after shot reflects the limitation of their physical space, and what could be their ultimate destiny: just another "movie" for another unwitting soon-to-die couple to pop into the VCR.

From the Saul Bass-style opening credits which intentionally remind one of *Psycho* and the Herrmann-esque score to the obsessive-compulsive nature of squirrely Mason, who speaks in odd but literate cadences ("*rules are rules*") not entirely unlike Norman Bates, *Vacancy* seems to not merely understand but actually synthesize what the term "Hitchcockian" means.

On the last principle, gallows humor, *Vacancy* also scores some points, proving jaunty in its sense of shock and surprise. Watch, for instance, how much mileage Antal gets out of a simple scenario: someone unseen knocking on the door to the honeymoon suite. The opening act of *Vacancy*, with the couple gazing at the grotesque, filthy motel room ("*I'm sleeping with my clothes on.*"), reveals not just a great if morbid sense of humor, it puts other recent horrors to shame because the simple scenario (*someone's at the door...*) requires no CGI special effects, no short-attention-span editing techniques, and no overt gore or violence. It's the art of the nuance, and the understated humor: the realistic reactions of the two leads to their situation makes the scenario genuinely frightening.

This isn't post-modern humor, even in the discussion of "Prozac-Zolof" cocktails, but merely sharp talk from a couple not getting along. It's funny, but not so funny that the audience doesn't believe it. Also, the death scenes, excepting the horrifying snuff film footage, which is blunt and gruesome, evoke gasps, laughs and screams in the best tradition of Hitchcock.

In terms of the 2000s, *Vacancy* is rife with ideas that held currency in the decade. First, of course, and in common with *The Ring*, or *Pulse*, *Vacancy* concerns the way technology divides and destroys people, rather than connecting them.

In this case, the easy access to video cameras and players has created a world in which people seek more and more bizarre "entertainment," such as snuff films. Technology has opened the door to perversion. The film also wickedly plays on the decade's reality show vibe, in which everyone desires to be famous for fifteen minutes. Here, Amy and David, who want no such attention, are sought to be the "stars" of their own (brutal) snuff show.

The film also works in some pointed, but not over-the-top commentary about pharmaceuticals, another key element of the epoch. Amy is basically numbed by her Zolof/Prozac cocktail. She is numbed to her life, essentially, and to her experiences because of her grief. Ironically, her marriage is

revived on what the characters call “one last great adventure together,” when their lives are mutually threatened by Mason’s band of murderous moviemakers. True, both Amy and David are scared to death, but *Vacancy* makes the case, perhaps, that feeling something—whether grief or terror—is better than feeling numb, or nothing.

Vacancy reaches back in film history with its Hitchcockian themes and visual approach, but simultaneously is of its time, exploring the ideas that so roiled the decade; ideas involving the use of technology, and the ways that modern Americans check out of difficult realities rather than choosing to face them head on. Crafted cleverly and with great intelligence, there is no vacancy about this film. It is anything but empty.

Wrong Turn 2: Dead End (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Erica Leerhsen (Nina Pappas); Henry Rollins (Dale Murphy); Texas Battle (Jake Washington); Alexa Palladino (Mara Stone); Daniella Alonso (Amber); Steve Braun (Jonesy Lewis); Matthew Currie Holmes (M); Crystal Lowe (Elena); Kimberly Caldwell (Kimberly); Wayne Robson (Old Timer); Ken Kirzinger (Pa); Ashley Earl (Ma); Clint Carleton (Brother); Rorelee Tio (Sister); Jeff Scrutton (Three Finger).

CREW: Twentieth Century–Fox Home Entertainment, Summit Entertainment, Constantin Film present: *Wrong Turn 2: Dead End*. Casting: Nancy Naylor Battino, Kelly Martin Wagner. Production Designer: Brentan Harron. Costume Designer: Hisami Yamamoto. Bob Comer, Simon Ager, Eric Bates, Olivia Barratier, Keegan Douglas, Giles Chin. Music: Bear McCreary. Director of Photography: Robin Lowewen. Film Editing: Ed Marx. Producers: Jeff Freilich. Executive Producers: Erik Feig, Robert Kulzer. Written by: Turi Meyer, Alfredo Septien. Based on Characters: Alan B. McElroy. Directed by: Joe Lynch. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A famous reality show actor, Caldwell (herself), is murdered in West Virginia by inbred cannibals on her way to star in a new TV program, *Ultimate Survivalist*. This new series pits a number of young people against each other in a setting with “post-apocalyptic crazies” all around them, and each round includes competition and elimination. Unknown to the series host, Dale (Rollin) and the others, at least at first, the players are actually surrounded by the murderous hillbillies, including Three Finger (Scrutton), who see the interlopers in their woods as prey. At first, the reality show players are cutthroat with each other as they attempt to win the series grand prize of \$100,000, but then, reality dawns on them after the director is killed. A few survivors take refuge in a local paper mill, where the cannibals are just sitting down to a family dinner.

COMMENTARY: This direct-to-video follow-up to the harrowing *Wrong Turn* (2003) is well-made, intense and splattery as Hell. *Wrong Turn 2* delivers the bloody, exciting goods, and both franchise and general horror fans won’t hate themselves for watching. At times needlessly exploitative, the film nonetheless throws plenty of surprises at the audience, including the identity of the final girl.

This sequel to *Wrong Turn* also serves as a great time capsule of the 2000s, with a well-forged through-line about both the reality shows of the time, and the War on Terror. The film even finds time, in its final act, to pay homage to the dining room sequence that ended the original *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1973).

The fictional reality show within the film, *Ultimate Survivalist*, is surprisingly plausible in the era that gave the world *Survivor*, and *Boot Camp*. The movie’s reality show, with its artificial threats and opportunities for interpersonal backstabbing is an unholy blend of both, and *Wrong Turn 2* has wicked fun mocking the tropes of the form. The film’s first scene even involves an authentic reality star, from season two of *American Idol* (2003), Kimberly Caldwell, bitching about having to do another reality

series, before she is brutally murdered. The murder is extra-savage intentionally and emerges as a kind of in-joke acknowledging America's love/hate with these fifteen-minute-of-famers. Caldwell was a good sport to do the scene, and the movie, for certain. The same goes for Henry Rollins.

What feels so self-reflexive about the film is the fact that reality shows thrive on the worst in human nature: people doing anything to win, people being tricked, and so forth. In various programs, competitors are unfaithful (*Temptation Island*, for example), they lie, and they conspire for others to fail.

This look at human nature is all done, in simpatico with a line from *Wrong Turn 2*: "People want to be entertained!"

This is funny, however, because people have often made similar complaints about horror films. They showcase violence, sadism, and torture, and in the 2000s even gave the world gorno or torture porn. Critics of the horror film as a form are, similar, horrified that this material passes as entertainment for people. Therefore the makers of *Wrong Turn 2* are surprisingly clever about tying these two critiques together. They critique the shallow, superficial reality TV show trend, at the same time they comment on that critique as it relates to horror.

And, in some ways, the film concludes that the forms can be similar.

Both are about weeding out characters, and only one "survivor," or winner, in many cases.

Also, the final girl "sweepstakes" is intriguing in this film. There is one character who is introduced as the obvious choice to be the final survivor. But how these sweepstakes turn out is a great surprise.

That artistic flourish also mirrors the reality TV show paradigm, where there are constant surprises, and early contestants who appear promising for the win, flame out. The ultimate expression of the dog-eat-dog mentality of reality TV programming arrives at film's end when the survivors realize that, for dinner, they have been dining on their former competitor, Kimberly Caldwell.

One of the competitors in the film, Jonesy, is an Iraq War veteran, and he's looking to win the game after that experience, using what he learned from his time in the service. Again, this feels like a subtle commentary on the nature of the American Dream in the 2000s. Young people went off to war and fought and died there. Those who survived came back to find a rigged system, and a lack of opportunity. Jonesy's recourse is to win a reality TV show, if he wishes to become financially successful. That's a shameful thing in a nation that is supposed to "support the troops."

"The sooner you realize you can only depend on yourself, the better off you'll be," the film tells us, reflecting on the way the social contract in America was fraying in a decade of disaster, war, and two economic recessions. As one character in the film notes, "America's sick," and that comment underlines the film too.

As does the remark "you never know when your life's gonna change." That very well could be the credo for the post-911 age. On one sunny Tuesday morning, America's destiny changed, and the destiny of its people changed too. No one saw it coming, but everybody's life changed that September day. The hillbillies here could be stand-ins for terrorists, or simply the threat to expose the phoniness of so-called "reality" TV programming, but it's clear, no matter how interpreted, that *Wrong Turn 2* does its best to operate on two tracks simultaneously. It is both a gruesome, effective horror movie, and, on another level all together, a horror film that reflects its age in a meaningful way.

The film even explores, at least tangentially the xenophobia and red state/blue state division of the decade. One character refers to the "red state cast from Hell," and one of the competitors even tries to relate to the suffering of the cannibals and their kin. "They're just like you and me ... except uglier." There is even an economic motivation for the hillbilly bad behavior put forward in the film. One family remained behind in the WV town when the local paper mill closed and took away all the jobs. This economic reality harks back to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the slaughterhouse in the Texan town, but also is of the moment given the defection of good jobs from the United States as a result of NAFTA and other trade deals in the 1990s.

The dinner scene late in the film, as noted above, recalls the finale of the Tobe Hooper film, but also reveals how little has changed from 1973 to 2007. In both circumstances, economic hardships destroy families. Those that can't relocate or find jobs, descend into "horrors" such as cannibalism and inbreeding in horror films. That's an exaggeration of real life, where the result is actually a cycle of

poverty, and in some cases, mental illness.

Although *Wrong Turn 2* is, perhaps, not as suspenseful and original as its predecessor is, it is a surprisingly good and smart horror movie that holds the series in good stead as it moves forward through the first decade of the 21st century.

The Zombie Diaries (DTV) * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Scott Ainslie (Sgt. Jim McCulloch); Toby Bowman (Corporal Jez Nicholson); Victoria Nalder (Lee Ann); Juliet Forester (Sharon Buckley); Anna Blades (Vanessa); Craiga Stovin (Andy); Leonard Fenton (Bill); Jonathan Ball (Matt); Allison Mollon (Elizabeth); Kyle Sparks (Greg); Jonnie Hurn (John); Sophia Ellis (Anna).

CREW: Dimension Extreme, Bleeding Edge Films and Off World Films present *The Zombie Diaries*. Music: Stephen Hoper. Director of Photography: George Carpenter. Film Editors: Michael Bartlett, Kevin Gates. Producers: Michael Bartlett, Kevin Gates. Written and Directed by: Michael Bartlett and Kevin Gates. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A pandemic in Asia moves westward, into the United Kingdom. A TV news crew interviews several witnesses about the illness, which soon becomes a zombie apocalypse. The film crew seeks shelter in a poultry farm near a local village, and over the next few months, documents the disintegration of modern civilization as humanity falls to the zombies.

COMMENTARY: *The Zombie Diaries* is not a great horror film, or even a good one, but it is a prescient one. In 2020, the pandemic involving Coronavirus, or COVID-19, starting in China, swept the world in the early months of the year, causing economic devastation, and overwhelming healthcare systems around the globe.

The Zombie Diaries, which is split into different video diaries (named, consecutively “The Outbreak,” “The Scavenger,” and “The Survivors”), commences with an event very much like this real-world crisis. The film crew learns of a pandemic in Asia that creeps through Western Europe, attacks Great Britain and soon crosses the Atlantic to the United States and New York. The pandemic is described as being something like a “bird flu” and mistaken for the common cold, which makes treating it difficult. This is also what happened in 2020 with COVID-19. Similarly, the information about the disease, coming from many different countries is shown in the film to be confusing and contradictory. The contradictory information is followed by quarantines in cities such as London, and the overrunning of major hospitals. Again, *The Zombie Diaries* gets all of this eerily right, especially if one is writing from the perspective of the 2020 COVID-19 disaster.

Alas, other than this fascinating parallel, the film, lensed in the found footage format, is not particularly accomplished. All the film’s central characters are of the same age demographics, for example, which doesn’t seem realistic given the unfolding situation. It feels more like these actors are all the director’s friends, and hail from a relatively small, non-diverse polycule, to coin a term. Likewise, in an age when the zombie masses are depicted in frightening proportions in films such as *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), the paucity of zombie extras in this film make for invidious comparisons. It is true that this is a low-budget film and shouldn’t be compared to a big budget Hollywood epic, yet *The Zombie Diaries*, in its casting selections, doesn’t manage to pull off its premise.

The film follows the progress of the zombie plague over many months, as phone service is lost, and grocery stores go empty. The film charts this descent in only quasi believable fashion, but a character trenchantly notes, “*I know what people in the Twin Towers felt like*,” drawing an explicit connection to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in America to this pandemic, or outbreak. It is fascinating that the film looks

backwards to a disaster of its own decade, even as it forecasted a disaster of the 2020s.

Many of the expected hallmarks or conventions of the found footage film can be found here. There's a driving scene with characters in a car, a scene colored with a night vision filter, and the film goes to static as a camera man is attacked. These touches reinforce the notion that *The Zombie Diaries* doesn't do anything too amazing in its 80-minute running time, except follow its then-popular format. Historically, the film is of interest not for its quality then, but for the fact that it saw a pandemic from Asia coming, and one that would be the focus of confusion and angst, causing massive disruptions of healthcare service and resulting in quarantines.

In one way or another, zombie films always concern the collapse of infrastructure, as the trains stop running on time, and mankind devolves into a new dark age, and this one is no different.

TIMELINE: 2008

January 26: Because of sub-prime mortgage crisis, global stock markets tumble.

February 19: Fidel Castro resigns as President of Cuba. Raul Castro replaces him.

April 6: Democratic candidate Barack Obama gives a speech in which he notes that some Americans bitterly cling to guns and religion. This statement is jumped on by his opponent in the primary, Hillary Clinton, and Republican nominee John McCain.

August 8: Start of the 2008 Summer Olympics.

August 29: John McCain picks Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. She is the second woman to run on a presidential ticket in American history, and also the first person from Alaska.

September 15: Senator John McCain announces that "the fundamentals of the economy are strong."

September 24: Senator McCain suspends his presidential campaign briefly to deal with the financial crisis.

September 24–30: CBS airs anchor Katie Couric's multi-part interview with Governor Palin, who is unable to name a single source of news that she reads regularly and claims that Alaska is the first line of defense against a Russian invasion. The interviews are widely mocked for the candidate's lack of knowledge on any topic that could remotely qualify her to serve as Vice President of the U.S.

October 2: Governor Sarah Palin and Senator Joe Biden clash in the one-and-only Vice-Presidential televised debate.

October 3: The Global Financial Crisis continues. President Bush signs the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act, creating a 700 billion-dollar fund to bail out failing banks.

November 4: Barack Obama is elected to the Presidency in a landslide, with a whopping 345 electoral votes. This is the largest electoral tally since Ronald Reagan in

1980.

December 14: At a Baghdad Press Conference, an Iraqi man throws his shoe at President Bush, calling the action a “farewell kiss” from the Iraqi people. Bush dodges the shoe successfully and leaves office a month later.

*The Alphabet Killer (DTV) * * ½*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Eliza Dushku (Megan Paige); Cary Elwes (Kenneth Shine); Timothy Hutton (Richard Ledge); Tom Malloy (Officer Steven Harper); Michael Ironside (Captain Nathan Norcross); Bill Moseley (Carl Tanner); Carl Lumbly (Dr. Ellis Parks); Brian Scannell (Jay Castillo); Larry Hankin (Perry); Jack McGee (Hank); Melissa Leo (Kathy Walsh); Andrew Fiscella (Len Schafer); Rocco Sisto (Father McQuarrie); Tom Noonan (Ray Gullikson); Frank Rossi (Francis Baker); Meltem Cumbul (Elisa Castillo); Kristina Jewell (Wendy Walsh); Sarah Anderson (Elizabeth Eckers); Shawn Michael (Anthony Peters); Bailey Garno (Carla Castillo).

CREW: Intrinsic Value Films, Wide-Eye Creative Films, Trick Candle Productions and New Films International Present *The Alphabet Killer*. Casting: Nicole Abellera, Natasha Cuba, Nancy Naylor, Kelly Wagner. Production Designer: Alicia Keywan. Costume Designer: Lynn Falconer. Special Effects: Richard Fike, Tim Phoenix, Megan A. Ballantyne, Jennifer Basnyat. Music: Eric Perlmutter. Director of Photography: Joe DeSalvo. Film Editor: Frank Reynolds. Producers: Tom Malloy, Isen Robbins, Aimee Schoof, Russ Terlecki. Executive Producers: Brandon Baker, Mark Clark, Eliza Dushku, Izak Filiba, Lusi Filiba, Ron Gell, Nesim Hason, Sezin Hason, Greg Polissen. Written by: Tom Malloy. Directed by: Rob Schmidt. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An obsessed homicide detective, Megan Paige (Dushku), obsesses over an unsolved murder case, the killing of Carla Castillo, sure that she can find information about the killer based on the victim's initials. The obsession grows so strong that Megan has to go on leave and see a psychologist after she attempts suicide. Two years later, Megan returns to work, still contending with adult-onset schizophrenia, but the old case rears its head. Another victim with double initials is found, and though her superiors are reluctant to see her assist, Megan consults on the case. As Megan revisits the case, she discovers the killer is close to home.

COMMENTARY: This relatively late (like a decade too late) entry in the serial killer genre is loosely based on a true story, and, intriguingly, focuses mostly on the mental well-being of the lead detective. Eliza Dushku plays an investigator who becomes so obsessed with a case that she begins seeing ghosts of the victims. And, her return to that case basically seals her fate in a mental institution. So, this is a dark film, and one mounted with seriousness and good intentions

For horror fans, *The Alphabet Killer* straddles an interesting line. Paige sees an apparition, one who haunts her to the point of suicide. That ghost is depicted as real, meaning that the audience actually sees it, along with Paige. But this is not a supernatural film, and the apparition is actually a symptom of mental illness. Paige can't stop fixating on her murder case. And the result is the hallucination of this “ghost.”

There have been many serial killer films which showcase how a detective's family life suffers from doing his or her job (*Red Dragon*, for instance), but *The Alphabet Killer* is commendable for its total commitment to this story-point. Megan has to take meds, is not allowed to carry a gun, and faces a long road of recovery ahead. In the years following her suicide attempt and her return to the force working a desk job (in the records department) she loses both her passion for work (solving homicides) and her fiancé, played by Cary Elwes. Some see her behavior as “*misguided martyrdom*” while others see Megan

as totally committed to stopping evil.

Megan's journey is a fascinating one that fits in well with a trend seen in horror films of this period: characters who are on prescription medication. The answer to solving this decade's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is medication. The answer to stopping Freddy in *Freddy vs. Jason* is Hypnocil, or prescription meds. And this movie sees Megan controlling her schizophrenia with meds the best she can, at least until she decides to go where the case leads her, no matter the cost to her sanity. The film's last scene is haunting because Megan pays the price for that level of commitment.

Less remarkable, perhaps, is the story actually involving the serial killer. Like *The Watcher*, this movie can't quite get over the hackneyed or familiar nature of this screen "monster" at this late date. Suspicion is thrown to a creepy priest at one point, and also an abusive husband. Finally, hiding in plain sight, the killer is revealed in an underwhelming fashion that feels contrived by the screenwriters, not a genuine outgrowth of Megan's story.

As noted in other reviews, the best serial killer films of the 2000s tend to take the serial killer format away from the police procedural, into realms of fantasy, like *The Cell*, or into a story so big it is, literally, operatic, like *Hannibal*. *The Alphabet Killer* is a respectable film and Eliza Dushku plays a character unlike any in her repertoire, but finally the film simply can't overcome the familiarity of its format, or the clichéd nature of its presentation. Even the killer's *modus operandi* using the letters of the alphabet to select victims, is not particularly interesting or unusual. Horror films often use the "Based on a True Story" gimmick to drum up excitement for a mostly fabricated story, but even that can't keep *The Alphabet Killer* from seeming like nothing more than giving audiences a repeat of the oft-seen serial killer ABCs.

I would be happy to live another thirty-five years and never see another police-procedural horror film.

*April Fool's Day (DTV) **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Taylor Cole (Desiree Cartier); Josh Henderson (Blaine Cartier); Scout Taylor-Compton (Torrance Caldwell); Joe Egender (Ryan); Jenifer Siebel (Barbie); Samuel Child (Peter Welling); Joseph McKeelher (Charles Lansford); Frank J. Aard (Wilford); Sabrina Ann Aldridge (Milan Hastings).

CREW: 360 Pictures, Stage 6 Productions, Mill Creek Entertainment and Sony Pictures Home Entertainment present *April Fool's Day*. Casting: Lindsay Hayes Kroeger, David Rapaport, Marty Siu. Costume Designer: Jennifer L. Soulages. Music: James Stemple. Special Effects: David Beavis, Richard Kratt. Director of Photography: Michael Maley. Film Editing: Raul Davalos. Producers: Tara L. Craig, Frank Mancuso, Jr. Story by: Danilo Bach. Written by: Michael Wilgart. Directed by: The Butcher Bros. M.P.A.A. Rating: N/A. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the night of April 1, 2007, a wealthy socialite, Milan Hastings (Aldridge), who works with developmentally arrested children is drugged and falls to her death in an April Fool's Day prank gone wrong. One year later, all those involved with the prank, including spoiled brother and sister Blaine (Henderson) and Desiree Cartier (Cole), are invited to Milan's grave, and told in a note that one of them must confess to her murder, or they will all be killed.

COMMENTARY: *April Fool's Day* is another remake-in-name-only effort that fails to live up to the memory of its source material. In this case, that source material is 1986's *April Fool's Day*, a slasher film about a group of teens traveling to an island to celebrate the birthday of their rich friend, Muffy. The

murders in the film turn out to be a hoax, in the spirit of the titular holiday.

Notice in the paragraph above how the first sentence is parsed: the remake fails to live up to the “memory” of the original, because the fact of the matter is that the original film—no matter where it stands in the nostalgic memory—is simply not very good. It features shallow, off-the-shelf characters, and doesn’t thread its needle well. And that means that the film wants to look and feel like a real slasher film throughout its run time, but then reveal in the shocking finale that all the crimes are a hoax. And, of course, there is no way that the murders, as depicted, could easily be hoaxes, once one factors in the gore, the timing, and the participation in the conspiracy by those who are victimized early, and then have to remain out of sight for the plan to continue to work on the others.

Those are problems, notably, executing a complex and ambitious idea: tying the April Fools holiday to the slasher paradigm and having the organizing principle be a trick.

By comparison, this remake attempts nothing so ambitious and yet is still terrible. It literally has nothing up its sleeve.

Here, a bunch of shallow, rich individuals who make the original’s characters look deep and meditative by comparison, backbite and struggle throughout the film to determine which one of them (or who else) might be blackmailing them involving Milan’s murder a year earlier. There is not one memorable death scene in the film, or really, one memorable line of dialogue. The actors look cast for their blouse size, or for their abs.

Perhaps it is wise that the film does not end with the same hoax scenario, or set its action on an island, like the original so as to boast opportunities for originality. But nothing original is actually done in any intriguing fashion. The film is set in a world of the super-wealthy and beautiful, but has very little to say about that world, except that being the “winner” in that world is always the end goal, the hell with family, or ethics. One moderately funny joke in the film sees a hypocritical Republican candidate for office running on the generic platform of “*lowering taxes and raising values*.” He then gets run over by his own campaign’s value wagon, an appropriate punishment given his secret involvement in Milan’s death. But this is as deep as the movie ever wishes to tread.

April Fool’s Day is shot in and around Monroe, North Carolina, where this author lived from 1999 to 2009, and in Charlotte, North Carolina, where this author has lived since, and about the only interesting aspect of the film, for this author, is picking out and recognizing the shooting locations. Historically, it is intriguing that Scout Taylor-Compton appears in the film, and that she played Laurie Strode in Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* films. Like Jamie Lee Curtis after *Halloween* (who appeared in *Prom Night*, *Terror Train*, *Road Games*, and *The Fog*), it looks like this “Laurie” could earn the title of Scream Queen in the 2000s.

The Burrowers (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Clancy Brown (John Clay); William Mapother (William Parcher); Jocelin Donahue (Maryanne Stewart); Doug Hutchison (Henry Victor); Karl Geary (Fergus); David Busse (Young Bluecoat); Alexandra Edmo (Faith); Brigid Fleming (Sister); Christopher Hagen (Father); Galen Hutchison (Dobie).

CREW: Lionsgate home Entertainment and Blue Star Productions presents *The Burrowers*. Casting: Toni Cobb Brock, Nancy Naylor, Shari Rhodes, Kelly Wagner. Costume Designer: Deborah Overton. Music: Joseph LoDuca. Special Effects: Almost Human, Invisible Pictures. Director of Photography: Phil Parmet. Film Editors: Andy Grieve, Robb Sullivan. Producers: William Sherak, Jason Shuman. Executive Producers: Peter Block, John Sacchi. Written and Directed by: J.T. Petty. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After a family is brutally attacked in the Dakota Territories on August 11, 1879, a party is

assembled to rescue the survivors, who, presumably, have been captured by a Native American raiding party. One of the men, Fergus Godfrey (Geary), is in love with Maryanne (Donahue), one of the missing girls. The hunt does not go well, however, when the men learn that the family was attacked not by men, but by horrific monsters known to the Indians as Burrowers. These creatures poison their prey, paralyzing them, and then bury them in the ground, to be eaten later. Fergus's posse comes under attack by the relentless creatures.

COMMENTARY: This Western or period horror film features a great, and psychically disturbing, villain or monster. The Burrowers are low-crawling beasts with cricket legs, rounded, sucking maws, and stubby, weird faces. Their appearance is unnerving enough, but their behavior and history is even more grotesque. According to the Native Americans in the film, the Burrowers have been around since “*before the white man*,” and were known to feed on buffalo. After the white man killed the buffalo, however, the burrowers found another food source: *humanity*.

These creatures poison their prey, slitting their throats near the carotid artery. Their victims go into a coma but can't sleep. The poison then softens their skin and organs, the so-called “*soft parts*.” The burrowers proceed to bury the liquefying victims in the ground, face up (while they are still conscious) and then return, later, to suck the vital fluids and other vitals from their quarry, all while they are still living, and conscious.

The Burrowers does not shy away from showcasing this process, with central characters and even children victimized by the nightmarish monsters. The idea of being rendered helpless, awaiting the gruesome death is a powerful one that the film exploits well. Even the last shot is powerful, revealing a helpless young man undergoing the feeding process, a reminder that the Burrowers are not dead.

Lensed almost entirely outdoors, *The Burrowers* is a beautiful film in terms of imagery as well. One great shot late in the action lingers in the memory. A group of wounded men, including Fergus, are deep in the forest. The Indians have captured Parcher (Mapother) as “bait” to lure the Burrowers to their position so as to kill them. The camera adopts an overhead shot as a number of burrowers converge from the edges of the frame, moving towards the center, as the men face a hopeless confrontation. Other compositions, of people discovering human faces glaring up from the dirt, are similarly disturbing.

The film's pace, alas, is a bit leisurely. While there is ample time to appreciate the imagery, and register the terror of the Burrower behavior, the film never quite achieves the intensity that horror film fans might desire. The final confrontation is an effective climax, but there are long spells of inaction that take away from the film's overall effectiveness.

Thematically, *The Burrowers* is compelling. The narrative concerns racism, and the interaction between white culture, and the native culture. The white man's presence and habit of destroying natural resources, such as the buffalo, has caused a deadly imbalance. The Burrowers now eat Native Americans and white settlers because of that shift. Then, the white man, angry at the death of the settlers, blames the Native Americans. Here, Native Americans are tortured by Doug Hutchison's officer, and others are changed.

Instead of looking in the mirror and seeing what they have done wrong, the white men blame, attack and murder “the other,” in their midst. They fail to see “the other,” beneath the ground too. Although set in the Old West, the film was produced and released after the War on Terror, and the Iraq War. In both the film, and reality, American occupiers moved into new territories, and interfaced with local populations, thereby changing the balance of power and nature, unaware of how their own actions had impacted the local populations.

The general idea may be that when unlike cultures clash, monsters—burrowers or insurgents—dig in.

Cloverfield * * * *

Critical Reception

"Under the modern flummery, behind the faux amateurism and the handheld shudder, *Cloverfield* is a vastly old-fashioned piece of work, creaking with hilarious contrivance..."—Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*, January 22, 2008.

"It's a monster movie that not only fails as a monster movie—I've been more scared on the teacups at the fair—but also fails at having anything to say. It affects to have things to say about 9/11 and its immediate aftermath but doesn't. In fact, the most terrifying thing about *Cloverfield* is that it imagines it does."—Deborah Ross, *The Spectator*: "What a monster," February 2, 2008.

"Love it or hate it, *Cloverfield* mashing up a daikaiju film with a found footage film was inspired and oh, how those early trailers had us intrigued. Yeah, the characters can be a little annoying and I'm pretty sure the shaky cam in this film left me with some permanent inner ear damage, but you just have to appreciate this film on some level. Disregarding the need that the creature designers have for some serious therapy on their woman issues (the critter's head seriously looks like a part of the female anatomy), *Cloverfield* shows the idiocy we can expect of our fellow human beings given an unexpected crisis. It gave us just the slightest hint of a star director in the making (Matt Reeves seriously knows how to make *Planet of the Apes* films).

As a found footage film, it's forced to come up with some of the more cringey and ham-fisted ways to make real people film themselves in situations no sane person would be filming that this style of film generally produces, but it did a good job of capturing New York locations, and the Statue of Liberty's head, fresh from its appearance on a Snake Plissken poster, was a stunner. *Cloverfield* delivers the shocks, it's fun (it's certainly a much better daikaiju film than Roland Emmerich's foray into *Godzilla*), and the parasites were also a clever idea (so clever I had it in an unpublished story and my heart broke a little seeing the concept used in this film, but hey, we writers don't own ideas, we just channel them). A fun time."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Lizzy Caplan (Marlena); Jessica Lucas (Lily); T.J. Miller (Hud); Michael Stahl-David (Rob); Mike Vogel (Jason); Odette Yustman (Beth); Margot Farley (Jenn); Theo Rossi (Antonio); Brian Klugman (Charlie).

CREW: Paramount Pictures presents a Bad Robot Production, *Cloverfield*. Casting: Alyssa Weisberg. Costume Designer: Ellen Mirojnick. Production Designer: Martin Whist. Special Effects: Fugitive Studios, Creative Character Engineering, Hammerhead Productions, Tippet Studio. Director of Photography: Michael Bonvillain. Film Editor: Kevin Stitt. Producers: J.J. Abrams Bryan Burk. Executive Producers: Sherryll Clark, Guy Riedel. Written by: Drew Goddard. Directed by: Matt Reeves. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The night before Rob (Stahl-David) is slated to leave Manhattan for a new job, his friends throw him a going-away party in the city. At the event, something strange occurs, and the city is attacked by a colossal, inhuman monster. Rob and his desperate friends attempt to flee the city as the monster lays siege to it. Rob also goes in search of Beth (Yustman), the love of his life, while the terror unfolds.

COMMENTARY: *Cloverfield* is a 21st-century monster movie (think *Godzilla* [1954]) as shot from street level. The film's central conceit is that Manhattan is attacked one lovely May evening by a giant monster from the sea and that a pack of twenty-something party goers who happen to possess a handheld video camera document the attack and their survival attempts as best they can. Meanwhile in a manner and setting highly reminiscent of the 9/11 terror attacks, these kids also transmit their own hysteria and the chaos of a moment that will change the very nature of history, and the future.



Rob (Michael Stahl-David) watches in horror as scientists make an alarming discovery in *Cloverfield* (2008).

A found footage imagining of the highest order, *Cloverfield* is lensed from the immediacy-provoking point-of-view of the video camera; and the device itself is a player in the events as much as the characters. Thus, if you've ever wondered what it must be like to live in Tokyo when Rodan or Godzilla make landfall, this movie is for you. Importantly, no giant monster movie in the past—no previous kaiju effort—has been vetted from this unique perspective. *Cloverfield* is thus innovative and revolutionary, offering a flashy, highly imaginative perspective on a sub-genre that was in danger of going out of fashion. *Cloverfield* grabs a hold of you at the start and doesn't let go. Even when it's over, it lingers in the mind.



An intentionally blurry action shot of chaos from the found footage horror movie *Cloverfield* (2008).

This author adores the *Godzilla* films but at the risk of offending the purists, it is fair to acknowledge that *Cloverfield* corrects at least one aspect of the traditional monster movie. Specifically, in kaiju films, the third person camera is often positioned relatively high in relation to the action, so that as Godzilla stomps through a gorgeous, carefully constructed miniature of Tokyo, our eyes automatically correct and synthesize the image in terms of *human* scope. Viewers realize the buildings are miniatures and that the monster is a man trudging about in a heavy rubber monster suit. The angle—often at Godzilla's eye line—is as much a giveaway of the phoniness of the scenario as is the zipper on the back of the suit. Of course, there are also low-angle shots to be found in Japanese monster films, but by an abundance, the camera is perched at eye level with the monster and that's the reason we don't quite believe what we're seeing. It's simply how our eyes read and process imagery.



Terror on the streets of Manhattan. From left, Jason (Mike Vogel), Rob (Michael David-Stahl) and Marlena (Lizzy Caplan) begin their escape in *Cloverfield* (2008).

By contrast, *Cloverfield*, with its immediacy-provoking, first-person shaky cam and “street level” perspective, removes many visual impediments to believing with your own eyes the existence of a giant monster. Here, the viewer catches glimpses of the monster from a distance, from street level and from a helicopter aerial view. All of these shots are impressive and track as authentic. The monster isn’t merely huge, it’s actually terrifying in terms of size, motion, and behavior.

The inevitable result: *this is a scary movie*.

I hasten to add, this effect—terror—is what the giant monster movie has always strove for, but rarely achieved. I can think of two occasions, perhaps, where terror was achieved: *King Kong* (1933) when stop-motion animation was a new and unfamiliar form, and *Godzilla: King of Monsters*, which in searing, atomic-laced, stark, black-and-white photography felt like a burning, grim testament to the real possibility of a man-made, nuclear apocalypse.

Cloverfield is the next quantum leap forward, or stage of evolution for giant monster cinema. It updates the genre so well that it makes the idea of a giant monster pummeling New York frightening. You never “don’t believe” in this movie, and that’s a remarkable achievement. But make no mistake, it isn’t just the choice of angles, or the first-person camerawork that renders the film a masterpiece.

Cloverfield knowingly trades on the apocalypse mentality we all lived in during the aughts on a regular basis. It possesses a strong “*culture of fear*” vibe. The monster here topples building like it’s 9/11 all over again, the U.S. military retaliates with shock and awe fireworks akin to the Baghdad Blitzkrieg of 2003, and the trapped and desperate Americans seeking shelter recalls the context of Hurricane Katrina. In toto, the monster in this film is a rough avatar for every 2000s era disruption. *Cloverfield* strongly taps into this Zeitgeist by dramatizing how—in a heartbeat—normality can be shattered.

Visually, the film constantly reflects this notion of fate and normalcy lost with a brilliant technique: *flash cuts and brief interludes of “old” footage that has been taped over to make room for events of the disaster*. This taped-over footage, which is featured only periodically, showcases two lovers, Rob and Beth, waking up together early one morning and frolicking, and later taking a trip together to Coney Island, riding the Ferris Wheel.

The video footage of the monster then “overwrites” this more pleasant reality, just as the present overwrites the past in human existence. It is this conceit that makes the film more than just a chase through New York with monsters nipping at young adults’ heels. This old “home movie” footage, in pointed contrast to the monster footage, is the human connection needed to make the main characters people that we care for. The timing and events of a crisis don’t exactly leave time for much character development or meaningful conversation, but these periodic flashes of a normal life now lost to time resonate because they demonstrate that these people are just like us.

Matt Reeves, the film’s director, has accomplished something amazing here. He’s found an inventive conceit for a tired genre (the first-person camera perspective) and utilized it throughout the film without cheating. There’s no movie bullshit, no jump-cuts—nothing—to compromise his vision and the belief that this world-shattering event is being recorded by a video camera. And within that framework, with the taped-over footage peeking into the monstrous present, he’s even been able to add resonant layers to his *dramatis personae*. It’s a great achievement.

Cloverfield shows the world that found footage movies can be epic, rather than cheapjack, affairs and that the monster movie still possesses relevance in a culture buffeted by monsters such as terror, war, and natural disaster.

*The Cottage (DTV) * * * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Andy Serkis (David); Reece Shearsmith (Peter); Jennifer Ellison (Tracey); Steven O’Donnell (Andrew); James Bierman (Bouncer); Cat Meacher (Receptionist); Danny Nussbaum (Man in Suit); Logan

Wong (Muk Li San); Jonathan Chan-Pensley (Chun Yo Fu); Simon Schatzberger (Steven); Doug Bradley (Villager with Dog); Dave Legeno (The Farmer).

CREW: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, Isle of Man Films, the UK Film Council, and Screen Yorkshire present a Steel Mills Picture, *The Cottage*. Casting: Tania Polentarutti. Production Designer: Crispian Sallis. Costume Designer: Marianne Agertoft. Special Effects: Filmgate. Music: Laura Rossi. Director of Photography: Christopher Ross. Film Editor: Tom Hemmings. Producers: Ken Marshall, Martin Pope. Executive Producers: Steve Christian, Hugo Heppell. Written and Directed by: Paul Andrew Williams. M.P.A.A. Rating: unrated. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two bickering brothers, David (Serkis) and Peter (Shearsmith), abduct a woman, Tracey (Ellison), and bring her to a remote cottage in the countryside. They attempt to ransom Tracey to her gangster uncle but fail miserably. Tracey escapes from the cottage holding Peter hostage, but things take a strange turn when they encounter the neighbor: a deformed, homicidal farmer (Legeno). Now it is up to David to save his brother, especially because he is the career criminal who got Peter into this situation in the first place.

COMMENTARY: *The Cottage* is a surprising and intense horror movie, in part because it doesn't present as one, at least at first. The movie opens with a botched kidnapping, which descends into a comedy of errors. After appearing to be, essentially, a crime comedy-drama for the first hour, the film plunges into outright terror as the kidnappers are confronted with a monstrous boogeyman, the Farmer, and his sharp cutting implements and booby traps. The movie turns bloody and dark, and then concludes, at least briefly, with a fanciful paean to brotherhood, before heading back into the monstrous dark one last time.

If one imagines a blend between *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Cottage* comes into focus a bit more clearly. In short order, the film introduces the audience to brothers David, and Peter. David is a competent criminal and played well by Andy Serkis. He has thought through everything, except, perhaps, his choice in partners. By contrast, Peter is a clumsy fool, an average joe hoping to make some money, and he inadvertently causes a lot of problems. For instance, he takes off his mask and calls David by name, so that Tracey can identify her captors. The film spends a lot of time with David and Peter, and their cohort Andrew (O'Donnell), bumbling through the kidnapping in the cottage. The comedy feels a little exaggerated, but not necessarily in a bad way.

Then things take a horrible turn. The Farmer shows up and the movie slips into a hardcore gore-fest. The kidnappers attempt unsuccessfully to dodge beartraps, and they encounter such grand guignol sights as a room decorated with severed human heads. At one point, the brutal and unnaturally strong Farmer cuts off Peter's foot with a shovel, and then takes the same implement to Tracey's face, and the results aren't pretty. Meanwhile, Doug Bradley plays the leader of a group of locals who make the denizens of Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1972) look friendly and welcoming. The locals insist that "*strangers don't fare well in these parts*," and they are not kidding.

"*This is the worst night of my life*," a character notes early on, and perhaps that notation is the point. David and Peter (and Andrew too) set out with a plan to get rich, but it's a dangerous plan. As the old saying insists: man proposes and God disposes. Here, the bumbling crooks abduct Tracey, only to find that she is far tougher and cleverer than they have anticipated. Then they encounter the Farmer and realize that they aren't such tough hombres after all.

The worst night of their lives? They have no idea.

And so here we must come back to the very 2000s idea about fate. So many horror movies of this era involve fate. It goes back to 9/11, and the idea of, half-asleep, getting up to go to work on a sunny Tuesday, and then, out of nowhere, having the world turn into a nightmare of falling buildings, crashing airplanes, and dust clouds. *The Cottage* gets at that idea spectacularly, but by shifting tones to make the point. The movie starts out small and inconsequential, focusing on small matters involved with the kidnapping. Then, out of nowhere, horror happens. The brothers reach a fate that no one could have

expected, or believed possible, at the start of this long night of the soul.

A question to ask in a film like this involves the purpose behind the grotesqueries. Is there a reason for *The Cottage* to descend into such utter violence and gore? To visit upon these bumbling would-be-criminal-masterminds the wrath of a deformed, mutant Farmer?

The answer comes near the end. As the movie establishes, David and Peter bicker a lot. They are brothers, but they do not treat each other well. They are enemies, not friends, at times. And then, they are viciously attacked, brutalized and left for dead by the Farmer at one point. And this little, miraculous grace note appears in the movie. The two brothers lay on the ground, grievously wounded, looking up at the night sky, and at the stars.

And they have a reckoning.

"I'm sorry," says David. "I don't think even you could have foreseen this," Peter replies.

In this magical moment, with the stars twinkling overhead in the dark black, the brothers find each other again. For the rest of the movie, they work as one. They fight and die for each other. All the nonsense about the kidnapping and money is gone. Their lives are eventually lost, but in their deaths have found what matters to them most; their love for one another.

Take this one to the bank: *The Cottage* starts out as an exaggerated crime comedy, then goes full-bore into the goriest movie you have ever seen, and then stops just long enough from the blood works to have the characters discover something important about themselves and each other.

I loved every minute of it.

*Day of the Dead (DTV) * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Mena Suvari (Sarah); Nick Cannon (Salazar); Michael Welch (Trevor); AnnaLynne McCord (Nina); Stark Sands (Bud Crain); Matt Rippy (Doctor Logan); Pat Kilbane (Scientist); Taylor Hoover (Local Girl); Christa Campbell (Mrs. Leitner); Ian McNeice (Paul); Ving Rhames (Captain Rhodes); Robert Raise (Mr. Leitner); Michael McCoy (Mr. Noble); Laura Giosh (Mrs. Noble); Vanessa Johansson (Receptionist); Mark Coolidge Johnson (Sheriff Carver); Davide Pineda (Deputy).

CREW: Millennium Films, Taurus Entertainment Company, Emmett/Furla Films, Nu Image Entertainment GmbH and D.O.D. Productions, with First Look International Present *Day of the Dead*. Casting: Nancy Naylor, Laura Sotirova, Jeremy Zimmerman. Production Designer: Carlos Da Silva. Costume Designer: Gina Hendrix. Special Effects: Worldwide FX. Music: Tyler Bates. Director of Photography: Patrick Cady. Film Editing: Nathan Easterling. Producers: Boaz Davidson, James Glenn Dudelson, Randall Emmett, George Furla, M. Dal Walton III. Executive Producers: Danny Dimbort, Robert Franklin Dudelson, Avi Lerner, Paul Mason, Jordan Rush, Trevor Short, David Varod. Based on the motion picture *Day of the Dead* from George A. Romero. Written by: Jeffrey Reddick. Directed by: Steve Miner. M.P.A.A Rating: R. Running time: 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A small Colorado town, Pine Valley, is quarantined by the U.S. military under the direction of Lt. Rhodes (Rhames). A zombie plague has begun, created by scientists working on bioweapons at a secret laboratory nearby, on "*Project Wildfire*." As zombies overrun the town and the military, denizens attempt to flee. Three soldiers, Sarah (Suvari), Salazar (Cannon) and Bud (Sands) go AWOL in the town, as Sarah teams up with her brother, Trevor (Welch) to rescue her mother, and escape the contamination zone.

COMMENTARY: George A. Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985) may not be the best film in that director's living dead saga, but it looks like the unvarnished work of William Shakespeare compared to this remake-in-name-only, direct to video effort.

Audiences in 2008 would have welcomed a sequel to Zack Snyder's excellent *Dawn of the Dead*, but this film is not that, either, despite the presence of Ving Rhames.

In fact, there is no overt connection at all, in this *Day of the Dead* to either Romero's series of films, or Snyder's re-imagination of 2004. What distinguishes Romero's films is his steadfast social consciousness; the director's willingness, ability and artistry in connecting his films to the times they are produced. In other words, Romero's films are almost always about things. Even when he has a bad day (see: *Diary of the Dead*), there is a minimum threshold of intelligence.

This version of *Day of the Dead* has no such minimum threshold, and that's baffling, since Steve Miner is a solid director who has done good work on other occasions. This film, shot in Bulgaria, and featuring notable up-and-comers like Mena Suvari and Nick Cannon, is inexplicably poor, although not without a few good moments here and there.

This *Day of the Dead* tells the story of the first days of the zombie plague and, quite unnecessarily, provides an explanation for it. In particular, Dr. Logan, which is a character name from the Romero film, has developed a deadly bioweapon, and it has gotten loose in the Colorado town. This plot line sounds more like *The Crazies* (1973), than one of the living dead movies, one may detect. Alas, the addition of the bioweapon plot also fundamentally changes the nature of the zombies. These are fast-moving zombies, in the vein of *28 Days Later*, but also, not really zombies, because they have not yet had time to rot. In one bizarre and terrible scene, we see quick-cut insert flashes of human cells being rewritten by the deadly zombie virus. So, somebody goes from being fully healthy and human to zombified in seconds. The look of the zombies in this film is not caused by burial, decay and rot, but an instantaneous transformation to that look by the virus.

Which, frankly, doesn't make a lot of sense.

And then there's the character of Bud. In *Day of the Dead*, there was also a character named Bub, a zombie who retained some semblance of his humanity. He tried to shave, liked listening to music, and ultimately learned how to operate a handgun. The character of Bud in this film is one of the most absurd ever included in a zombie movie. Specifically, when infected by the virus, Bud does not immediately begin eating people.

Why? Pre-zombification, he was a vegetarian.

Yes, this subplot is the movie's idea of a social conscience. Vegetarians who become zombies will not eat other humans because in life, they did not eat animal flesh. The stupidity of this notion is almost too much to bear, and it, like many other moments, only sinks further the film's chances of success.

Day of the Dead features several gaps in situational logic too. At the end of the film the survivors are all trapped in a basement, the secret laboratory. They are trapped there, with no exit, and limited ammo. They know they need to shoot the zombies in the head.

So, what do the survivors do? They go ape-shit crazy and waste ammo like nobody's business, failing to make kill shots again and again. The scene ends with an "homage" (or is it rip-off?) of John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), as the basement is destroyed by a jury-rigged explosion.

Still, as empty, stupid and pedantic as this remake of *Day of the Dead* remains, there is one terrific moment worth calling out. As the film's protagonists successfully evacuate a hospital, zombies behind them start jumping out of second story windows into the parking lot below to get them. This single-minded "drive" to get to the humans, resulting in zombies falling out of the sky and landing everywhere, feels oddly realistic and true to modern zombie lore. They are so desperate to feed on flesh that windows, and indeed, a fall, mean literally nothing to them.

If only the film had worked as hard to find other moments that feel this right, and developed the material of George A. Romero thoughtfully, instead of so exploitatively. The Romero film was about the breakdown of society after months, perhaps years of the zombie plague. It looked at divisions in people over the best way to proceed and came down on the fault-line between the military and scientists. Bub's plot line added new layers to the zombie nature and evolution, and inched the films closer to Romero's short story, "Anubis," and its stunning conclusion. This *Day of the Dead* is a poorly shot runaround, with no nary a thought in its vegan head.

Deadgirl (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Shiloh Fernandez (Rickie); Noah Segan (J.T.); Candice Accola (Joann); Eric Podnar (Wheeler); Jenny Spain (Deadgirl); Andrew DiPalma (Johnny); Nolan Gerard Funk (Dwyer); Michael Bowen (Clint); David Alan Graf (Mr. Harrison); Susan Marie Keller (Nikki); Timothy Muskatell (Wes); Kelle Cantwell (Brit); Dustin Hess (Walter); Kathleen M. Darcy (Ms. Flynn); Steven Dean (Gym Coach); Christina Masterson (Rosy).

CREW: Dark Sky Films presents *Deadgirl*. Casting: Matthew Lessall, Lynn Reinstein. Costume Designer: Lynn Haaga. Production Designer: Diana Zeng. Music: Joseph Bauer. Director of Photography: Harris Charalambous. Film Editor: Phillip Blackford. Producers: Gadi Harel, Marcel Sarmiento. Executive Producers: Robert Hickman, Christopher Webster. Written by: Trent Haaga. Directed by: Marcel Sarmiento, Gadi Harel. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two unpopular high school boys from suburbia, Rickie (Fernandez) and J.T. (Segan), hang out at a dilapidated psychiatric hospital and make a bizarre discovery in the basement. There, they find a naked young woman, whom they name “Deadgirl.” The boys debate raping this undead “fuckslave,” assuming that, because of their unpopularity, she is “*the best*” they are ever going to get (have sex with). Two bullies, Johnny and Wheeler, find out about “Deadgirl” while Rickie tries to romance Johnny’s girlfriend, Joann (Accola), whom he has long had a crush on. Soon, the boys want to turn another girl into an undead “fuckslave” to serve their sexual desires, but “Deadgirl” is, in fact, a zombie, and spreads her infection to the boys that she attacks, threatening their lives. Rickie and Joann attempt to escape from the basement after matters go awry, but when Joann is injured, Rickie has a plan for her life ... and death.

COMMENTARY: Bafflingly, the powerful and disturbing *Deadgirl* has often been accused of being misogynistic, when in fact, any objective reading of the film would draw the absolute opposite conclusion. This is a movie that is absolutely caustic about men in general, and rich, white teenaged jocks, to be specific. The privileged young men in the film happen upon a restrained, naked female zombie, and all they can think about doing is fucking her. They don’t rescue her. They don’t even worry, that, apparently, she is an infectious zombie. They just want to penetrate her. When this plan doesn’t work out as they desire, they immediately decide that they should find another, living human woman to satisfy their needs.

They want slaves, not lovers.

Clearly then, *Deadgirl* is a “*Men Behaving Badly*” film, one that fits in with other efforts of the decade, from *What Lies Beneath* and *Gothika* to *Shutter* and *Teeth*. The filmmakers’ view of the young men it features is that they are toxic individuals who want to control women, and don’t even see them as human, or as having the right to reject them. Instead, women are mere fodder to be “fuckslaves,” their own agency be damned.

Deadgirl’s view of men is actually even more negative than the preceding paragraph suggests. Rickie, ostensibly the “best” of these affluent teenage boys, willingly goes along with the exploitation of Deadgirl instead of freeing her at his first opportunity. And, when he realizes that he can’t actually win over the object of his long-time affection, Joann, to love him or date him, he chooses to transform her into a fuckslave too. In other words, her life, her individuality, are secondary, tertiary concerns, if concerns at all. If she refuses him, if she rejects him, she deserves to be a zombie who can’t say “no” to him anymore.

In Rickie’s eyes, and again, he’s clearly the best of the boys in the film, a woman who rejects him

has no rights or place at all, and her humanity is indeed sacrificed to his sexual needs can be fulfilled. Once more, alas, it is necessary to note that some of this is uncomfortably close to reality in the Trump Era. The incel phenomenon, noted in other reviews of films of this type, is all about men who, while protecting their own personal liberty, afford women no such liberty. They believe they are entitled to women's bodies, even though they are unappealing, socially inept individuals. They don't do anything to treat women well, and yet believe fervently that they have been denied the women of adequate hotness by the women's rights movements, progressives, and others. *Deadgirl* is scariest in its understanding that it isn't just incels who believe they should have ownership over women's bodies, but many mainstream, ostensibly good guys too.

To be clear, *Deadgirl* would indeed be misogynist in nature if it approved of the boys' treatment of the female zombie, and Joann. But the movie doesn't adopt that stance. Instead, the film exposes the boys as selfish, indulged individuals who have profited from the "*boys will be boys*" attitude that has prevailed in the American middle-class. These horny boys are just "*red-blooded, American*" males after all, interested in sex with girls. But in *Deadgirl*, these anti-social behaviors cross a line (er, many lines) when these "boys" decide that they are entitled to rape their captive, and capture and hold other women for the express desire of serving their needs.

In *Horror Films of the 1990s*, this author wrote about horror films of that era that explored the sexist, exploitive teenage culture of "*boys will boys*" in America in relation to films such as *The Rage: Carrie 2* (1999) and *Stir of Echoes* (1999). The former film was a fictionalized account of Lakewood California's "Spur Posse" from 1993, a group of jocks who competed for points by scoring sexually with female students. *Stir of Echoes* posited a conspiracy among affluent neighbors to protect two promising high school jocks, who attempted to lure and rape a mentally handicapped young woman. This was a reflection of the notorious 1989 Glen Ridge rape case wherein entitled high school athletes from rich families raped and sodomized a similar victim and were protected from consequences by their wealth and by expensive lawyers.

In the 2000s the horror film went even further charting misogynistic attitudes in America's affluent communities, acting essentially as the canary in the coal mine that would explode in the culture in 2017 with the birth of the #MeToo Movement. In the 2000s, the tolerance and encouragement of violent attitudes towards women was known as "Rape Culture" and became a source of controversy. Some claimed it didn't exist at all. Others saw rape culture as pervasive in the frat houses of America's colleges and coined the term "*toxic masculinity*" for attitudes ignored in men that put their sexual needs ahead of women's rights. In 2003, basketball star Kobe Bryant was accused of sexual assault. Media celebrities such as Donald Trump and Bill Cosby have faced, between them, more than 70 accusations of sexual assault. Trump has 16 allegations to his name, Cosby some 60 allegations over forty years.

As the boys in *Deadgirl* note, "*down here, we are in control*," suggesting that their domination over *Deadgirl* (and eventually over Joann) is specifically about power, and the right to control other people. This idea of control over women as the source of the problem is also played out in J.T.'s behavior. He "kills" *Deadgirl* three times, and she keeps coming back to life. She becomes a practice dummy for his criminal behavior. He doesn't see her as a person, but as someone he can use for curiosity, for control, for domination.

The set-up of *Deadgirl* is actually one that is used throughout the 2000s many times. On the surface is normality (a high school; a hospital), but underneath is a "haunted" world. America is a House of Wax, ready to melt when seen for what it has become, in *House of Wax* (2005). *Session 9* (2001) concerns the way that a blighted past has been buried in a dilapidated hospital, only to come to the surface when that hospital is explored. *Deadgirl* is very much in this style of "*America's haunted present*." It suggests that underneath the surface, ghosts populate dark and buried corners of our cities, our towns, and our streets. Rickie and J.T. descend from the "surface" of acceptability and normality to a subterranean realm, physically and mentally, where their Ids are unloosed, and their behavior is monstrous.

Again, it's hard to deny that the monsters in *Deadgirl* are the boys, not the actual zombies. And so the zombie is granted another re-interpretation during the decade when it was most popular. The

zombie has been the avatar for a revolt of the masses (*Land of the Dead*), a reflection of Generation X's boredom on the job and refusal to grow up (*Shaun of the Dead*), and a product of society's uncontrolled, rampant rage (*28 Days Later*). *Deadgirl* positions the zombie as an exploited other, someone who has no rights, no power, and no say about what happens to them. The titular character in the film is just a body to be acted upon.

Horror movies are always about politics in one form or another. To ignore or deny that fact is to bury one's head in the sand. *Deadgirl* shares elements in common with a horror film of the 1970s, *The Stepford Wives*. There, rich men in suburbia replaced their wives with subservient robots who looked like their wives, only with bigger breasts. Arriving more than thirty years later, *Deadgirl* picks up that baton from *The Stepford Wives*. It notes that for many men, women are just receptacles for their sexual desires. Perhaps the saddest thing about this is that there is a percentage of people who will read this review and conclude that the film is somehow radical and extremist, when it is society that is radical and extremist. It keeps giving us examples of powerful (Trump, Weinstein, Cosby, Jeffrey Epstein) and non-powerful men (Brock Turner) who demonstrate real hatred for women.

Diary of the Dead * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"He [Romero] is exploring: old media vs. new media; the cacophony created by all those voices in cyberspace; government spin and abandonment; the breakdown of civilization in a crisis; and what happens if the end of the world approaches and there's no one there to record it. Or their camera battery is about to die."—Barbara Vancheri, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 15, 2008, page C1.

"...*Diary of the Dead* tries to tell us that we've become so attached to our technology that we've lost touch with the sting of death, but his movie contributes to that numbness. While his audience is supposedly digging the 'profound' message, they can also cheer on the bloodshed and carnage. Given the uncritical eye of some of his fans, *Diary of the Dead* proves one thing: It's the audience that's becoming the zombies now."—Kevin Courrier, *Boxoffice*, February 2008, pages 46–47.

"Every genius deserves a mulligan. George A. Romero was certainly trying to become relevant again, on a lower budget than the Universal money he'd had for his last dead film. George was really eager to make this movie, really eager to go low budget again. This is the weakest of all of Romero's Dead films. It barely feels like a Romero film—his editing style was changing from its earlier style, because, oops, Romero didn't edit this film. There's a point where a successful director must let practical production matters come into his life, and it makes sense that at this point in his career, this could be a delegated task—but nobody could edit Romero like Romero could. This is a found footage film, as well. I think Romero generally wanted to do some cool things with the format, this wasn't just a gimmick (or at least I hope it wasn't).

Romero's best films (the original Dead trilogy, *Knightriders*, *Martin*) had Romero fearlessly telling stories in his own particular way, with gusto. There was desire in *Diary of the Dead*—but no gusto. I don't know that Romero felt confident here, but the worst thing you want a Romero film to ever be is ... a little dull. Even though it's trying to be flashy and fast and hip, there was very little that was new here."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Todd William Schroeder (Brody); Laura de Carteret (Bree); Amy Lalonde (Tracy Thurman); Martin Roach (Stranger); Josh Close (Jason Creed); Joe Dinicrol (Elliot Stone); Michelle Morgan (Debra Moynihan); Shawn Roberts (Tony Ravello); Philip Riccio (Ridley Wilmott); Tatiana Maslany (Mary Dexter).

CREW: Firefire Films, Romeo-Grunwald Productions and Third Rail Releasing presents *Diary of the Dead*. Casting: John Buchan. Production Design: Robert Lazarus. Costume Designer: Alex Kavanaugh. Special Effects: Mark Ahee, SPIN West VFX. Music: Norman Orenstein. Director of Photography: Adam Swica. Film Editing: Michael Doherty. Producers: Ara Katz, Artur Spigel. Executive Producers: Steve Barnett, Dan Fireman, John Harrison. Written and Directed by: George Romero. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On a day that amateur filmmaker Jason Creed (Close) is shooting his student horror film, the zombie apocalypse begins. With his movie cast and crew with him, Jason uses the cameras to chart the first days of the zombie apocalypse. With his film professor, lead actress, make-up man, girlfriend Debra (Morgan) and a few others in tow, Jason boards an RV, heads for Scranton, and sees for himself (and for the camera) how Pennsylvania has changed since the dead have risen from the grave.

COMMENTARY: On his best days as a filmmaker, George Romero brilliantly de-mythologized and de-romanticized vampire lore (*Martin* [1976]), depicted with harrowing intensity the breakdown of society and the family unit piece-by-piece (*The Crazies* [1973]), and commented on American “mall” or consumer culture (*Dawn of the Dead* [1979]). And, of course, with *Night of the Living Dead* he almost single-handedly redefined the meaning of the word zombie, as well as the monster’s nature.

Even on Romero’s average days, he gave audiences films of significant interest: a *Creepshow* (1982) there, a *Day of the Dead* (1985) there; a *Monkey Shines* (1988) now and again. Perhaps the greatest thing about this filmmaker is Romero’s enduring social conscience; his willingness to face human ugliness with blunt, violent ferocity.

Which brings us, alas, to *Diary of the Dead*, a low-budget horror film which concerns a group of student filmmakers from the University of Pittsburgh who are crafting their own horror movie. But then something unbelievable and frightening happens on location. In the midst of shooting, a *real* zombie apocalypse breaks out, fracturing society and sending America into a tailspin of destruction, chaos and anarchy. The director of the student horror film, Jason (Close) realizes he has been handed a golden opportunity and vows not to fuck it up, so he begins documenting everything with his Panasonic digital video camera.

When Jason uploads some of his footage later (called “The Death of Death”), he is excited that it has received 72,000 hits in just eight minutes. Creed’s gotten his big break; and more to the point, he feels he is actually helping people ... sharing accurate information about the apocalypse when the corporate mainstream media is just selling re-packaged spin and lies from the government.

As one might suppose, the meme here is *Night of the Living Dead* re-cast for the YouTube generation. *Diary of the Dead* is thus a post-everything, apocalypse-mentality movie. Post 9/11, post-Katrina, post-*Inconvenient Truth*, and so on. Literally all of these “disasters” (or disasters in wait) are referenced in voiceover narration during the film’s first five minutes.

And honestly, that’s part of the film’s overarching problem.

The best Romero films are inevitably those which feature social sub-text and require some level of interpretation on the part of the viewer. Just consider the social critique of *Dawn of the Dead* or the feminist anthem that is *Jack’s Wife*. Alarming, Romero forgets everything he’s learned about nuance and subtlety and is here intent on spoon-feeding his messages to the audience.

Part of the problem in *Diary of the Dead* is the long, monotonous, pretentious voice-over from Debra, which explains, *ad nauseum* the theme and crux of the movie. That preachy theme is merely: “they are us” (meaning we are the zombies and the zombies are us.), “*They are us*” proved a meaningful, useful and original turn of phrase the first time Romero uttered it probably twenty years ago or more. The line was even spoken directly, if memory serves, in the 1990 remake of *Night of the Living Dead*. But familiarity breeds contempt, and now this idea is so threadbare and hackneyed that it simply cannot carry the weight of a feature-length film; no matter in what manner it is re-parsed. (“*Are we worth saving?*” is another way of suggesting the same thing, I submit.)

The voice-over narration is so preachy and delivered with such self-righteous solemnity that all the fun, momentum and energy bleeds straight out of *Diary of the Dead*. Horror films have to be “scary” first and then “*about something*” (often metaphorical...) second. This movie tends to skip the first level and thrust headlong into the hectoring social commentary.

It is disappointing to report that Romero’s other big theme here is wantonly cribbed from *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Romero focuses in *Diary* on the ways that seeing images on film, TV or the Internet “numbs” the audience to real human suffering. It is a plot-point—rather unbelievably—from

the moment the action starts, and Jason Creed *won't* put down his camera; regardless of what occurs around him. His friends might get attacked, zombies may lunge at him, but he's going to keep filming EVERYTHING because as long as he has the "filter" of the camera between him and unpleasant reality he is okay; watching instead of living; passively documenting instead of actively participating. This was the ultimate point of *The Blair Witch Project*, in which the director there, Heather held on to "filming" tooth-and-nail to retain her sanity; to deny the truth that she and her friends had become lost and hunted.

The only significant difference is that *The Blair Witch Project* got that message across brilliantly in one short scene. One of her crew picked up Heather's camera and turned it on her; made her feel what it was like to be the object of the documentary and noted that the eye of the camera "*wasn't quite*" reality. Simple. Elegant. Short. *Diary of the Dead* labors to make this point again and again, in voice-over, in action, in melodrama until we feel like we've been hammered with it. Romero was once horror's most important trailblazer, not the imitator, so this appropriation of theme disappoints on a massive scale.

The tired repetition of "*they are us*" and *The Blair Witch Project's* subtext are not the only familiar notes Romero strikes here. There's a scene wherein zombies surround a farmhouse and barn (like in *Night*), a scene wherein racial inequities are addressed in a new "class" society (like in *Land*), a criticism of the military mentality involving a vignette with the National Guard (as in *Day*), and so forth. There's a scene with families keeping zombies locked up in an apartment (*Dawn* redux), a scene with a mother and child zombies on the attack (*Night* redux), and on and on it goes. So, it's not just "*they are us*" that Romero regurgitates, but all his greatest zombie hits. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, perhaps he wanted modern audiences to see these touches, and in the fresh setting of a found footage film.

None of this criticism is meant to suggest that Romero has lost his touch completely. The director still stages some beautiful and eerie shots. One oddly disturbing yet poetic image features a zombie goldfish wandering around the bottom of a swimming pool. And the Gothic composition of one particular long shot set in an autumnal glade, with an actress in a diaphanous white gown pointing a pistol at her soon-to-be a zombie boyfriend, is an interesting evocation of a film form that Romero himself helped to put a stake through in the late 1960s. Yet for every moment that works, there is another that doesn't; that feels like Romero striving for meaning and "importance" when he should have just concentrated on telling us a good, involving horror story.

Let us examine a sequence that explains, in a nutshell, why *Diary of the Dead* doesn't work; why Romero doesn't see the forest for the trees. The film opens with Jason shooting a horror movie and his friend, Ridley is playing a shambling mummy in the production. We see a pursuit being filmed in the woods, as the girl in the gown is chased by the mummy. As director, Jason complains that mummies don't move fast, and that Ridley should shamble more slowly after the damsel in distress. The damsel—meanwhile—is upset that she is required to fall, lose her shoes, and show her cleavage all while screaming and being chased.

It's a self-reflexive moment, one that comments on horror movie conventions (as if this were Wes Craven's *Scream* [1996]), But then, at the climax of the film, Romero isn't content to leave it at that. No, that moment has to carry some additional meaning, and so the director pushes. He shoehorns. Ridley (the Mummy boy) becomes a zombie, still wearing his mummy costume, and chases the same actress (in the same gown) through the woods. She loses a shoe and the zombie rips off her blouse, revealing her cleavage.

Get it?

It's supposed to be ironic and funny that life has imitated art, but the scene has not arisen naturally from the material. Instead, Romero has gone like a guided missile for the second level of "meaning" without establishing the "reality" of the first level.

Ridley—the character dressed as a Mummy—left the horror movie film location two full days before becoming a zombie himself. We even see him on a webcam one day after the shoot (safe in his McMansion panic room with Francine). In this footage he is partying and imploring the others to come hang out with him. When his friends arrive, it is the day after *that* footage. (So, to re-cap the timeline: he was dressed as Mummy for the horror movie shoot October 24th; hanging out October 25th and then

killed and turned into a zombie on October 26th). Since he was at his house on the 25th and 26th, *why didn't he ever change his clothes?* He was at his home with his girlfriend Francine for over 24 hours, and he never took off those uncomfortable bandages?

He never took off his costume?

The answer behind the incongruity: If Ridley had acted in a believable manner and changed his costume. Romero couldn't have staged his "meaningful" life imitates art climax. But the problem is that he is so busy reaching—grasping, actually—for larger meaning, that he forgets to sell the reality of it; the truth of it.

One may also note Romero cheats his POV subjective camera approach from time to time (unlike either *Cloverfield* [2008] or *Blair Witch Project*). Sure, the film in *Diary of the Dead* that the audience watches is actually Debra's "final cut" of Jason's movie, so one can't object to the various angles and such (there are two cameras in service for a while). But why does the final cut feature those glitches that go to spells of blue? That suggests raw footage, not an edit.

Why also, in a scene with Ridley in the mansion (when there is only one camera) does Romero catch both Debra asking a question and Ridley answering that very question on screen without even a swivel from person to person? (In other words, there is no time lapse between the question and the answer; which means the single camera is facing two directions simultaneously—an impossibility).

And no, this is not nitpicking. If a director settles on a conceit like subjective camera, she or he is honor-bound to use it honestly and consistently. Romero gets about a B- on that front.

Similarly, the last scene of the film depicts two rednecks killing zombies in the woods.

Who's got the camera? Who is filming this event?

Are we to believe rednecks intent on shooting zombies in the head are also digital video camera literate? That they are also literate in uploading their footage to the Internet? (Jeez, in 2008 it took hours to upload even a half-hour video to Veoh, for instance.)

Again, it just feels off, like so much of the film. The reality of the scenario has been overlooked so the film can be "*about something important.*"

This coda, with rednecks wantonly shooting zombies to the tones of Debra's solemn voice over narration ("*are we worth saving?*"), makes the point about *Diary of the Dead's* problems quite well, actually.

Just think, Romero has shown rednecks guzzling beer and shooting zombies before (in *Dawn of the Dead* in '79), and able to make his point ("*they are us*") just by observing the ritual; just by pointing the camera and letting it tell the story. But here, he repeats the same images (not so well shot, one might add) and yet feels the need to explain and interpret their meaning for us.

Romero's earlier instinct was the right one.

Show audiences what's important and let viewers judge why they are important.

In the *Living Dead* movie pantheon, *Diary of the Dead* is the weakest entry. Another reason for the general low quality of this film is that the characters are pretty two-dimensional. And since they all must emote naturally while a camera happens to be rolling, the format doesn't do the *dramatis personae* any favors either. For instance, it's laughable how the English professor keeps swigging bourbon on cue; just for the camera—so the audience gets the idea he's a drunk. It plays like a cliché. Never mind that the character is given to wild, eloquent, poetic rambles about old men fearing "*mirrors*" and "*mornings*."

Who the hell talks like this? And more to the point—who the hell talks like this, unrehearsed, on camera?

A last note, if you'll indulge this author. I discovered the cinema of George A. Romero when I was a relatively young man. I must have been twelve or thirteen the first time I saw *Dawn of the Dead* and *Night of the Living Dead*. Those films fueled my subconscious and ignited my love of the horror genre. Why? Perhaps because there were so many things and ideas bubbling beneath the surface. Ideas about race, sex, society, the military, and morality. But it was all unstated, or at the least, *understated*, and in that gap my developing mind found the room to ponder these things; to decide for myself how I felt about the issues. *Diary of the Dead* is pedantic, preachy and so awfully trite that I fear the thirteen-year-olds of 2008 would look at Romero and his work and just say "*that old guy is talking down to us.*"

“*They are us*” does not cut it anymore, at least not how it’s vetted here. Romero’s next, and last *Dead* movie, *Survival of the Dead*, thankfully goes in a fresh new direction, and is a restoration of form for one of the horror film’s greatest artists.

Eden Lake (DTV) * * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kelly Reilly (Jenny); Michael Fassbender (Steve); Tara Ellis (Abi); Jack O’Connell (Brett); Finn Atkins (Paige); Jumayne Hunter (Mark); Thomas Turgoose (Cooper); James Burrows (Harry); Thomas Gill (Ricky); Lorraine Bruce (Tanya); Shaun Dooley (John); James Gandhi (Adam); Bronson Webb (Reece); Lorraine Stanley (Nat); Rachel Gleaves (Mel); Mark Devenport (Ashley); Alex Palmer (Paul).

CREW: Rollercoaster Films, Aramid Entertainment Fund and The Weinstein Company presents *Eden Lake*. Casting: Julie Harkin. Production Designer: Simon Bowles. Costume Designer: Keith Madden. Special Effects: Elements Special Effects, Filmgate. Music: David Julyan. Director of Photography: Christopher Ross. Film Editor: Jon Harris. Producers: Christian Colson, Richard Holmes. Executives Producer: Conor McCaughan. Written and Directed by: James Watkins. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young, professional British couple, Steve (Fassbender) and Jenny (Reilly), decide to go away for a romantic weekend. They plan to take a relaxing visit to Slapton Quarry, which will soon be the site of an affluent gated community: Eden Lake. When they get there, however, the couple’s planned idyllic weekend is interrupted by brazen, loud teenagers who ogle Jenny in her bathing suit, and who won’t keep their vicious dog away from them. These “*little terrors*” come by it honestly. The whole nearby town is populated by uncouth, rough customers who refuse to be accountable for the actions of their offspring. After a confrontation with the teens, the teens strike back against Steve and Jenny. They steal the couple’s car. When Steve tries to get it back, another confrontation descends to violence, and all-out war begins. The adult couple is captured, tortured and repeatedly stabbed by the children, but Jenny makes a brave escape attempt, only to learn that in this town, the parents look after their own.

COMMENTARY: *Eden Lake* is incredibly gory, and extremely disturbing in its social implications. The film posits out-and-out class warfare (middle vs lower class) in the context of what Conservative critics once called “*Broken Britain*,” circa 2007–2010. Accordingly, the film reflects a schism between the nation’s professionals or elites, represented by the protagonists, and the lower class, represented by the antagonists. In the film, the lower class is portrayed as ignorant, violent, and emotionally stunted. Of equal importance, perhaps, the film asks its hero, a schoolteacher named Jenny, to commit extreme personal violence against, essentially, a child, that most people would consider unthinkable. Jenny’s journey in the film takes her from the comment “*They’re just children!*” to the absolute necessity of slitting one child’s throat with a shard of broken glass. After committing this crime, she must hide in a bin of garbage and feces, an appropriate visual reminder of her descent to the very bowels of human existence.

The violence in *Eden Lake* is gut-wrenching indeed, but it is Jenny’s decision, finally, to murder this particular individual that lingers in the memory long after the movie has ended. That act, from a custodian of children, no less, implies that no meaningful accord can be reached between the elite and the every-man, and that more violence is destined to occur. The first battle of this new war is fought, ironically, at a place called “Eden,” a place of great and abundant natural beauty.

Eden Lake is savage indeed, but in keeping with the genre of the savage cinema, there is purpose and meaning behind all the violence. In this case, *Eden Lake* concerns an educated, affluent, “high-tech, high-touch” couple from the city going out to the country and encountering ignorant, ill-mannered

“working” people. This dynamic knowingly captures a facet of what—beginning in the latter half of the first decade of the 21st century—was known as “Broken Britain.”

There are two things to understand about “Broken Britain.” The first is that this phrase is a *political* slogan, popularized by the Conservative Party, and endlessly repeated by a biased echo chamber in the form of several tabloid newspapers. The other thing to understand is that the phrase “Broken Britain” is all about social disintegration. It was reported in 2009, for instance, in *The Independent*, that the UK boasts the highest teenage pregnancy rate in all of Western Europe. What this statistic doesn’t report, however, is the fact the pregnancy rate at this point, while high, was continuing the trend of going down.

Similarly, violent crime rates were reported as high in 2009, despite the fact that they too were trending down. In fact, in 2009, the murder rate in the UK was actually down 14 percent in just one year, according to *The Guardian*, in March of 2010 (“Is Britain Broken?”)²⁷

And this, my friends, is why “data” is only valuable when accompanied by an overarching narrative.

Clearly, the Conservative Party found the narrative it sought—the breakdown of the social order in Britain—a “fact” supported by statistics involving crime, gang membership, broken families, and teenage pregnancy. It was a dramatic failure of the Labour Party not to offer the competing narrative: the fact that trends were showing progress in all these social ills.

So why did these facts about Broken Britain “feel” so right, so true, to so many who read the news? In one instance, because of social media, surely, and its impact. In the age of the 24-hour news cycle, and the Internet, every single crime seems to be reported widely, even if you step back and see that violent crime is trending down, and has been since the late 1980s.

But let’s go with the reporting. It was in the news, everywhere, that Britain was broken, and failing. At least until Dave Cameron was elected PM, and it was no longer necessary for the Conservative Party to press the point. One other key data point to consider is that there was and remains a major health inequity that exists in Britain, and the United States for that matter. Life expectancy is much lower among those living in poverty, an “excluded” population, essentially. Broken Britain became, finally, the push for Brexit, the resentment of the poor and uneducated towards the “elites” who were not helping them overcome a “social recession,” or even grappling with a “sense of moral decay,” as Cameron phrased it.

Eden Lake picks up on this terror of increasing division and distrust between those who have, and those who have not. This fact puts it squarely in the tradition of Wes Craven’s *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), which pitted a middle-class “white bread” family against a desperate, cannibal family, in the Nevada desert. Some people term this new iteration of movie class warfare “hoodie horror,” because the rich and affluent characters clearly fear encounters with those outside multi-cultural cities, who lack the same education and world view that they have adopted.

Leave the big city, essentially, and you expose yourself to the ignorant, dangerous masses, who would as soon kill you as help you. And indeed, this is a Savage Cinema precept as well, going back to *Easy Rider* (1969), and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Take one wrong turn, and your life is in jeopardy. Steve and Jenny find this out the hard way in *Eden Lake*. They encounter a “gang” of children who, apparently, haven’t been properly raised by their blue-collar parents. One parent, who works at a restaurant, refuses to hear anything negative about her child. Another parent knows full well all about his child’s murderous impulses, but still finds defending the child and committing murder himself preferable to siding with the affluent elite.

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Eden Lake* involves the way that Steve negotiates what it means, in this new world, to be masculine. He can’t very well look like a wimp in front of his wife-to-be, can he? To prove he is masculine, he must confront the children he knows are dangerous. However, to battle children is also to acknowledge, intriguingly, that he is not in control; not the adult male he has been groomed to be. Steve finds himself in a no-win situation, and he simply can’t cope with it. The teens take turns stabbing him and beating him. One can’t help but wonder if Steve’s dilemma is a recognition of how difficult it is, at present, to negotiate masculinity in technological, egalitarian modernity.

Jenny is a schoolteacher, and therefore knows a thing or two about uncooperative students, and yet, she is also hamstrung by her sense of compassion for them. She loves children, otherwise she wouldn't be a teacher in the first place. Now she is put in a position to murder them?

Yet she adjusts.

The implication here is that Jenny—both as a woman and a teacher—is able to better able to negotiate the threats. At the very least, she lives longer. Jenny and Steve are largely outmatched, almost from their first encounter, because the children they encounter have learned too well from their anti-social parents. They don't respect authority. They don't respect the law. They have been nourished, it seems, on a diet of contempt and resentment for anyone outside their community. The leader of the gang uses his cell phone—and video evidence—to blackmail the others into taking their turns at stabbing Steve. This leader, and the other children, are worldlier, in a sense than Steve and Jenny are, because they have no compunction about committing violence, or protecting themselves. Again, they learned this from their parents; the “have nots.” Specifically, they have learned that authority protects the elite, not the poor.

Jenny does everything she can to save Steve, after a gruesome, sustained torture sequence that reminded me, a bit of the “piss your pants” sequence in *The Last House on the Left*, but she finally comes to the same realization as that aforementioned “white bread” family in *The Hills Have Eyes*: this is a battle for survival, and there can be only one victor.

The difference, one can assess, is that after Jenny commits murder, she is clearly bothered by it. She is haunted by the fact that she has taken the life of a child. The leader of the gang, by contrast, shows no such remorse. At the end, he wipes it from his memory, literally, by pressing “delete” on his cell phone. He destroys all the evidence instantly, and there is no indication that his conscience will ever revisit his crimes. The important thing? He's gotten away with something. He got one past the elite. Past the police. He eked out a victory in a world that seems tailor-made to deny him any victories, economic, or social.

Eden Lake stages its battles between the haves and have-nots in gorgeous, compelling, and suspenseful fashion. My only reservations about the film involve the fact that the elites are fully humanized as characters whilst the every-people are treated much-less three-dimensionally. The film panders to the belief, among the elite, that people who have failed economically or socially are not fully human or possess less-developed consciences. Steve and Jenny, by contrast, are given humanizing touches that we recognize. We know they are engaged and want to be married. We know about her job. They have goals and dreams. We don't know the goals and dreams of the locals.

Again, this complaint can be easily dismissed by considering the history of the genre, and the examples I've name-checked already in the review. The murderers of *Deliverance*, *Straw Dogs*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or *The Hills Have Eyes* are also not treated with much depth. They are, instead, avatars of terror. They are the uneducated, socially maladroit “savages” who threaten the representatives of civilization that are so unlucky as to enter their terrain.

Even the brilliant *Chain Saw* certainly plays into—or panders to—Southern stereotypes, so *Eden Lake* is not on terribly shaky footing. One just wishes the “villains” were humanized a bit more. Of course, perhaps the movie is cleverer than I give it credit for. In *Deliverance*, the violent locals were losing their home, essentially to the march of progress; the rerouting of a river, and the sinking of a whole valley. Civilization had passed them by, and in their culture's last hours, they got away with murder. Their crimes were a last desperate howl of existence.

Consider *Eden Lake's* similar set up. Here, a quarry—the location where the locals work—is being transformed into an “Eden” for the elites, a gated community for the wealthy. The every-person once poured his or her blood, sweat or tears into the quarry for living. Now, that same place is destined to become a playground for the affluent.

The right thing to do isn't commit murder, of course, but perhaps in the very set-up of the film, the makers of *Eden Lake* have reminded us that people become desperate when their home is taken away, and gifted to those who already seem to be the beneficiaries of a lot of good luck.

Or is it privilege?

The Eye * *

Critical Reception

"French directors Moreau and Palud try their best to scare up some effective chills via the clever use of blurry images and one fantastic reverse zoom but ruin all their good work with a laughably lame finale."—James Croot, *The Press*: "Giving Alba *The Eye*," March 29, 2008, page C4.

"Alba gives a flat, utterly unaffecting performance as a gifted woman who has another gift bestowed upon her when her sight returns."—Roger Moore, *The Orlando Sentinel*, February 4, 2008.

"Though Alba is absolutely lovely to look at, the illusion that she's anything more than eye candy evaporates pretty much as soon as she opens her mouth. All her lines seem to be delivered with either a Mouseketeer chippemess, or in a blood-curling shriek. That's too bad, because in terms of plot *The Eye* is kind of a cool premise, with solid subplots and an ending that ties up a lot of the film's loose ends."—David Koon, *Arkansas Times*: "'*The Eye*' needs correction," February 4, 2008, page 51.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jessica Alba (Sydney Wells); Alessandro Nivola (Dr. Paul Faulkner); Parker Posey (Helen Wells); Rade Serbedzija (Simon McCullough); Fernanda Romero (Ana Christina Martinez); Richal Ticotin (Rosa Martinez); Obba Babatundé (Dr. Haskins); Danny Mora (Miguel); Chloe Grace Moretz (Alicia); Brett A. Haworth (Shadowman); Kevin K. (Tomi Cheung); Tamlyn Tomita (Mrs. Cheung).

CREW: Lionsgate, Paramount Vantage and Cruise/Wagner Productions present, in association with Vertigo Entertainment, *The Eye*. Casting: Nancy Naylor Battino, Kelly Martin Wagner. Production Designer: James Spencer. Costume Designer: Michael Dennison. Music: Marco Beltrami. Director of Photography: Jeffrey Jur. Film Editor: Patrick Lussier. Producers: Don Granger, Michelle Manning, Paula Wagner. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Peter Chan, Doug Davison, Mike Elliott, Roy Lee, Darren Miller, Tom Ortenberg, Michel Paseornek. Based on the 2002 screenplay by: Yuet-Jan Hui, Oxide Chun Pang, Danny Pang. Written by: Sebastian Gutierrez. Directed by: David Moreau, Xavier Palud. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A blind violinist, Sydney Wells (Alba), receives a surgical eye transplant so she can see again for the first time since she was five years old. Almost immediately after the bandages have been removed, however, Sydney begins to experience strange and violent visions of death and dying. Her surgeon, Dr. Faulkner (Nivola) is at a loss to explain this, but one day, when Sydney gazes in the mirror, she sees a different woman staring back, not herself. Soon, she realizes that her new eyes are the source of the vision, and she travels to Mexico to learn about the donor. She learns of Ana, who committed suicide before donating her eyes, a woman who could predict death, but was powerless to stop it. Now Sydney must also prevent the horrifying visions she has seen from coming true.

COMMENTARY: Another remake of an Asian horror film, *The Eye* is one of those 2000s-era horror movies that features beautiful people and good production values, but little else. For example, *The Eye* features three—*count 'em!*—three instances of what this author terms the stay awake trope. In this type of shot, a character is jolted by something terrifying, only to realize, of course, that they have been dreaming. They jerk up, awake in their bed, usually, sweating and bug-eyed from the terror. Often, a stay awake shot occurs in a horror movie because a "scare" is needed to punctuate the action at certain junctures and keep audiences interested, or in the case of *The Eye*, awake. Indeed, to use the stay awake three times in a scant 98-minute running time is a testament to how little terror actually exists organically in the film.

The evil or supernatural transplant is an old and outdated concept, and *The Eye* doesn't do much to make it seem fresh, new, or particularly plausible. Here, the concept of "*cellular memory*" is discussed.

That's the (fictional) notion that traumatic memories can be held for storage in individual cells outside of the brain. That's the latest name for haunted transplants, but horror film history is rife with stories of body parts, transplanted from murderers, run amok. In movies, this notion has been the concept behind Oliver Stone's *The Hand* (1981), Eric Red's *Body Parts* (1991), and *John Carpenter Presents Body Bags* (1993), and the story, in particular, "Eye." On TV, an evil hand transplant appeared in "A Hand for Sonny Blue," in *Tales of the Unexpected* (1977), and transplants were the subject of "Spare Parts" on *Ghost Story/Circle of Fear* (1972). The whole idea is pretty much anti-science.

The Eye involves cornea transplant, which allows Sydney to see into the spirit world, and adopt the insight of a Mexican young woman haunted by visions of precognition. Sydney becomes, likewise, haunted. She is able to see the particulars of a fiery highway accident and, in the film's climax, helps others survive it. Alas, Sydney's new eyes are destroyed in an explosion, meaning that she no longer possesses second sight, or sight at all.

Of course, the nature of her "sight" raises some questions worth asking. For instance, consider this factoid: Sydney's unearthly visions always include unearthly sounds, and—every now and then—the sudden manifestation of blistering, tangible wounds (like burns and scratches). Technically, Sydney shouldn't hear anything out of the ordinary just because she happens to have creepy new eyes. If she gets the whole sensory package just from the new eyes, then *any* organ could have provided her these monstrous visions. Right? This movie could have just as easily been titled *The Liver*. Or *My Left Foot*. If the eyes are the important organ (and they are, if the title is to be considered valid) then the horror sequences should be limited to sight, not democratically sprinkled across the whole smorgasbord of touch, taste, smell and sound. The cynical part of this author fears this is a set-up for a sequel or franchise. Who knows what other body parts Ana Christina might have donated before she died? Are we being subtly set up for *The Eye Two: The Nose Knows*?

One might argue that the sounds and the tactile "feel" of the vision are for cinematic and dramatic effect, and while that is no doubt true, the film can't have it both ways. For example, there's a very dramatic scene late in the proceedings in which Sydney storms through her apartment and breaks all the light-bulbs (why she didn't just use the light switch is an unsolved mystery) so it remains dark and she can't see the visions. Then, she ties a red blindfold around her eyes, further disrupting her sight, to keep the pesky visions out. Well, if she can also hear them (and they can touch her)—as has been clearly established by the action at this point—then a blindfold isn't going to do a very good job keeping them away. Thus, *The Eye* also lacks even the most rudimentary sense of consistency in its approach to the supernatural. Sometimes the apparitions appear to be the herky-jerky style of those in *Silent Hill*. Other times, the ghosts appear normal, yet float a few inches above ground. Sometimes Sydney's visions go right through her body, and sometimes they actually touch her (thus creating burns). Sometimes the visions seem to be all in her head and sometimes the visions leave behind evidence in the real world (like a handprint in a pile of spilled sugar) that could, conceivably, be observed by third parties. Sometimes the visions are related to a central mystery and sometimes (as in the ludicrous case of a ghostly Chinese restaurant), they are totally random. Sometimes the visions are about the past (the Chinese restaurant again) and sometimes they are about the future (a bus accident).

Which brings this author to an important point: a horror movie isn't a *salad bar*. The director (or screenwriter) can't just pick and choose anything he or she wants and hope that it all fits together coherently in the end. Especially if it is a mystery that the audience is supposed to feel a part of, or curious about.

Now, one might make the argument that the director is asking viewers to undertake the same task as Sydney undertakes here: select with our eyes what is important and discard the rest. I would happily buy that explanation if I felt in my heart that the movie always knew where it was headed, as well as the point (or theme) of its narrative.

The film's valedictory voice-over, however, makes clear that *The Eye* has no idea whatsoever. So, here's the deal. All along Ana Christina has wanted, apparently, for Sydney to save a bunch of innocent people involved in a deadly road accident. That's what the visions have really been about (*just forget the Chinese take-out place, okay? It didn't happen.*) But the reason that Ana Christina died (she hanged

herself) was because she was “ultimately powerless” (verbatim...) to “prevent” the death she predicted.

But—wait! Sydney ended up having the same visions and saving everybody!!! So, there’s no “powerlessness” about it.

Ana Christina was obviously just an underachiever.

The point of the whole movie is supposed to be, according to the dialogue, that death is unchangeable; that fate is immovable and therefore the gift of insight (as in the case of the mythical Cassandra) is both a “*blessing and a curse*.” But then the movie has Sydney succeed in her rescue mission, proving that fate is actually changeable (like the movie itself). What’s the real message of *The Eye*?

When you’re in the market for eye transplants, don’t import ’em from Mexico.

This author usually refrains from noting that a film is dull. To state that a film is “boring” is only to acknowledge one’s own failures as a critic. No film is “boring” if one attempts to engage with it. But here’s a film where truly not much happens for most of the running time, and thus it qualifies as the exception to my long-standing rule.

The Eye is boring as hell.

More accurately, it is molasses slow. It takes one hour and three minutes to get to Sydney’s realization that her eye donor might be the key to solving her “visions” mystery. That’s a long (*long...*) time to go with no forward momentum in narrative; with just the specter of *helter skelter* visions appearing and disappearing. The audience is way ahead of the lead character for a long time, and that kind of thing is poison for a horror film, a genre that thrives on surprise and unpredictability.

Some people have also criticized Jessica Alba’s performance here, noting that it feels, well, medicated. She’s serene and flat throughout the film, no matter what her character contends with. For many years, my wife and I were close friends with a blind gentleman, and, actually, he was very much the same way. When this author asked him how he could stay so even and calm amidst so many challenges, he would simply quip that he was “a quart low on anxiety.” That’s also how Alba plays her role, whether intentionally or not. This approach, while not being particularly effective in a horror film, does maintain Sydney’s dignity as an individual.

Funny Games (DTV) * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Ann (Naomi Watts); Tim Roth (George); Michael Pitt (Paul); Brady Corbet (Peter); Devon Gearhart (Georgie); Boyd Gaines (Fred); Siobhan Fallon Hogan (Betsy); Robert LuPone (Robert); Susanne Haneke (Betsy’s Sister-in-law); Linda Moran (Eve).

CREW: Celluloid Dreams, Halcyon Pictures, Tartan Films, X-Filme International, Lucky Read and Warner Independent Pictures presents *Funny Games*. Casting: Billy Hopkins, Johanna Ray. Costume Designer: David C. Robinson. Production Designer: Kevin Thompson. Director of Photography: Darius Khondji. Film Editor: Monika Willi. Producers: Christian Baute, Chris Coen, Hamish McAlpine, Hengameh Panah. Executive Producers: Phillippe Aigle, Carole Siller, Douglas Steiner, Naomi Watts. Written and Directed by: Michael Haneke. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 111 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An American family consisting of George (Roth), Ann (Watts), son Georgie (Gearhart) and dog Lucky goes to its expensive summer home at the beach. The family is accosted, however, by two sociopathic young men dressed in white, Peter (Corbet) and Paul (Pitt), who proceed to kill the boy, Georgie, and torture Ann and George relentlessly, just for the fun of it, and, of course, for the appreciation of the movie-going audience.

COMMENTARY: Despite the exceptional cast and high production values, Michael Haneke's shot-for-shot remake of his own 1997 film of the same name is an exercise in sophistry. It is more than that description implies too. *Funny Games* is a not-very-subtle attack on film in general, and the horror film specifically, but one that blindly and relentlessly fails to consider the nature of either. Though beautifully lensed, *Funny Games* blames film and perhaps media itself, for the violence the director sees in society rather than looking to human nature or other root causes.

Funny Games blames the viewer for enjoying entertainment like, well, *Funny Games*. The director attempts to blame the audience for the violence that he himself has overseen in the creation of the film. According to scholar Brigitte Peucker, in her text *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film* (Stanford University Press; 2007) the 1997 version of the film "establishes a complicity between the film's spectators and the murders depicted in its narrative. It takes therefore, an aggressive—not to say sadistic—posture towards its audience." Peucker further establishes that "media violence is one object of" Haneke's critique. The same is true for the shot-by-shot remake of a decade later.²⁸

The connection between killer and audience that Peucker describes in the passage above is established through Haneke's intermittent smashing of the fourth wall. Pitt's Paul, ostensibly the movie's antagonist, stops the film in its tracks, literally, to speak to the audience directly about his brutal actions, and at times, even rewinds the movie itself, allowing the audience to relive the mayhem. Such moments are punctuated by commentary such as "We want to entertain our audience. Show them what we can do."

In this way, the film's actual narrative becomes unimportant, and Paul takes on the role of a God who change its shape, meaning, tempo and other elements. But he does so explicitly for purposes of bread and circuses.

Are we not entertained?

And if we are entertained, shouldn't we feel bad about ourselves for feeling that way?

With important elements such as theme and character reduced to cudgels to wield over the audience, and absent the context of a "real" story, the movie becomes merely another funny game. Haneke's approach seeks to make the audience feel guilty, essentially, for watching the sadistic torture and murder of an innocent family. Or, as the movie might remind its audience, movies are just as real as reality, since you can see them both. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, the director noted, similarly "In my films what I'm trying to do is depict violence in such a way that it becomes reality again for the audience."

Yet here is the important distinction that Haneke's approach ignores.

Real violence does not exist within an artistic framework, but movie violence so clearly does. The violence in film is shaped, at least by responsible filmmakers such as Wes Craven, John Carpenter, or Jordan Peele, for example, to offer meaningful and pro-social commentary on society. Movies are not just as real as reality, because they are, in any meaningful analysis, texts. They are works of art shaped to carry theme, purpose, and meaning.

The other problem with Haneke's critique, of course, is that violence has always been with us, and before the world had violent cinema, it had violent literature. Homer's *The Iliad* is violent. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is violent, and on and on. The great films in history, from *Grand Illusion* to *Platoon* (1986), also contend with the human impulse towards violence. Audience are not sick or bad for reading violent books or watching violent films, as Haneke's approach implies. Instead, they are seeking a way to contextualize reality. They are looking to find a meaning that only a narrative, story, or screenplay can provide.

Or they may even be seeking catharsis. The catalytic model of communication concludes that violent films have almost no impact on aggressive behaviors or actions, unless a person is already predisposed to violence as a result of day-to-day life.

To blame movies for violence in society is an old canard, and one that is laughable if one adopts the historical view. Remember how Roger Ebert and others vilified the *Friday the 13th* and other slasher films in the 1980s and accused them basically, of creating an evil world, with evil people?

Uh huh.

Today, the *Friday the 13th* films of that era are less violent, less disturbing than the average episode

of *Game of Thrones* (2011–2020), which is streamed to wide audiences and young audiences. Similarly, the torture porn films of the 2000s reflect what was happening in society at the time of their creation: the slide towards torture and barbarity in the War on Terror, as exemplified by American military treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, for example.

These films do not feature violence for mere violence's sake, as *Funny Games* means to imply. They are films that examine violence in a violent world, but within an artistic context with boundaries, rules, and most importantly, a point. Remember, art mirrors life. If life is violent, the art of will be violent, but that is not necessarily a terrible thing. Horror movies have always served as the canary in the coal mine, reflecting for the culture what it fears now, or what it will fear next. The shape of horror evolves as audience fears evolve, and those fears involve mortality, death, plague, torture and other aspects of the culture of their creation. It is facile and insulting for a filmmaker to make an incredibly violent film and punish the audience for seeing it or hoping to find some context in that art that provides meaning in their lives.

Indeed, Haneke is guilty of precisely that thing he accuses others of doing, creating a violent film to comment on a violent society.

Why is what he has done more socially valuable than the anti-violence *Last House on the Left?* (1972), or a film about reproductive rights, like *It's Alive* (1972)? Or a horror film about sexism (*The Stepford Wives* [1975]) or racism (*Get Out* [2016])? Why does he get to be a critical commenter on violence, but other artists don't get the same privilege?

Funny Games is the equivalent of a two-hours of finger wagging or *tsk tsk*-ing viewers for enjoying works of art that have the audacity to examine a crucial aspect of human life. The smug superiority of the enterprise makes it an unpleasant experience.

The Happening * * *

Critical Reception

"The shock value wears off quickly, though, and writer-director Shyamalan strands us—along with Mark Wahlberg and Zooey Deschanel—in a boring cautionary tale with an infantile eco-message about humanity needing to live in harmony with nature—or else."—David Germain, *The Guelph Mercury*: "Not much happening in Shyamalan's latest." June 4, 2008, page C7.

"*The Happening* makes you wonder whether Mr. Shyamalan's own switch may have been flipped. How else to explain his film's befuddling infelicities, insistent banalities, shambling pace and pervasive ineptitude? This isn't a case of picking on a guy who's already had a big flop, the infamous *Lady in the Water*. I try to see what's on the screen, not what's gone before, and the movie I saw was truly, mysteriously awful. Unless, of course, it was meant to be a parody of such nature-lashing-out thrillers as *The Birds*. But parodies are supposed to be funny, and the only laughs I heard were bad ones."—Joe Morgenstern, *Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2008, page W1.

"...you have to admire the chutzpah with which Shyamalan has returned, utterly undaunted, with another of his odd, self-conscious event movies: a film characteristically grandiose in ambition and dripping with alt.spirituality. *The Happening* is all too clearly supposed to be a thought-provoker, a conversation-inducer, a film that comes with its own water cooler for you all to gather round and chat excitedly."—Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*: "Chilling joke: Poor acting, weak script..." June 13, 2008, page 7.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Mark Wahlberg (Elliot Moore); Zooey Deschanel (Alma Moore); John Leguizamo (Julian); Ashlyn Sanchez (Jess); Betty Buckley (Mrs. Jones); Spencer Breslin (Josh); Robert Bailey Jr. (Jared); Frank Collision (Nursery Owner); Jeremy Strong (Private Auster); Alan Ruck (Principal); Victoria Clark (Nursery Owner's Wife); Robert Lenzi (Jake).

CREW: Twentieth Century-Fox and Blinding Edge Pictures present, in association with UTV Motion Pictures, Spyglass Entertainment and Dune Entertainment, *The Happening*. Casting: Douglas Aibel, Stephanie Holbrook. Production Designer: Jeannine Oppewall. Costume Designer: Betsy Heimann. Special Effects:

Quantum Creation FX, Spectral motion, Industrial Light and Magic, CafeFX, The Picture Mill. Music: James Newton Howard. Director of Photography: Tak Fujimoto. Film Editor: Conrad Buff. Producers: Barry Mendel, Sam Mercer, M. Night Shyamalan. Executive Producers: Gary Barber, Roger Birnbaum, Ronnie and Zarina Screwvala. Written and Directed by: M. Night Shyamalan. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: High school science teacher Eliot Moore (Wahlberg), who is estranged from his wife, Alma (Deschanel), learns at school of a strange happening on the East Coast. In New York City, citizens have begun to kill themselves, their self-preservation switch flipped off by some compound or toxin. As this strange event spreads, the couple flees Philadelphia with a math teacher and friend, Julian (Leguizamo), and his young daughter. Then the “attack” strikes their city, and they evacuate on a train. Julian heads to Princeton to find his missing wife and doesn’t survive the trip. The others continue to flee, to ever smaller population circles, as the entire Northeast is decimated by an attack that seems to be carried on the wind, but which originates not with foreign fighters ... but with Mother Nature.

COMMENTARY: Alfred Joyce Kilmer once wrote a poem about a tree that opened with the line “*I think I shall never see, a poem lovely as a tree.*” It seems appropriate to remember that poem, and that line, in light of the horror film *The Happening*, a widely pilloried, mocked, and dismissed horror film. Today, it exists as a wonderful punchline: a movie so “bad” that one can’t possibly defend it.

Mark Wahlberg as a science teacher?

Scared humans attempting to out-run the wind?

Plants communicating with people?

For those seeking to take down the film and its director, M. Night Shyamalan, there is plenty of ammunition by which to accomplish that task. Many folks have availed themselves of it.

Certainly, the film is a marked step down in quality for Shyamalan, after his earlier work. Some scenes just don’t come off well, and some scenes that should be powerful instead fall flat. But—perhaps stubbornly—this author still feels there is some value in *The Happening*.

The late Mr. Ebert’s prophetic thoughts in his review are similar to my own. He wrote: “*I suspect I’ll be in the minority praising this film. It will be described as empty, uneventful, meandering. But for some, it will weave a spell. It is a parable, yes, but it is also simply the story of these people and how their lives and existence have suddenly become problematic. We depend on such a superstructure to maintain us that one or two alterations could leave us stranded and wandering through a field, if we are that lucky.*”²⁹

Specifically, there are three qualities that help register *The Happening* as a promising film, even a worthwhile one, in the face of all the steaming piles of negative criticism. The first such quality is that the film stands tall as perhaps the nastiest, meanest, most grotesque of all Shyamalan’s cinematic works.

Some of the film’s imagery (like the shots of workers falling to their deaths from city buildings), appear deliberately designed to rattle our cages, to bring back the national psychological trauma of 9/11. A few moments near the start of the film are actually down-right vicious, and represent an out-and-out horror sensibility that we have not really seen from this director before, even in *The Sixth Sense* (1999). Similarly, the film’s coda—in which another “happening” begins—is well-in-keeping with familiar nihilistic horror tropes (namely George A. Romero’s 2008 refrain in the documentary *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue*: “*what’s it going to take to change us?*”)

Secondly, as much as viewers and critics guffawed over the idea of people communicating with plants and plants emitting deadly neurotoxins, there is, actually, a basis in fact in some of these ideas, and Shyamalan utilizes the concepts to tell his story of man’s denialism. Basically, plants get fed up and reject humans, deciding that mankind’s “sprawl” on the planet is now a mortal threat to their survival. So, the movie qualifies, perhaps, as the strangest revenge of nature film ever made.

One revenge of nature movie is William Girdler’s *Day of the Animals* (1977)—and *The Happening* is undoubtedly a call-back; *Day of the Trees*, or *Day of the Plants*. It’s not as if there are no genre antecedents or precedents for what Shyamalan has wrought here. He’s not “out of line” with traditional

horror thinking, as so many critics seem to believe. On the contrary, his film fits into a tradition of some great revenge of nature films (*The Birds*), some effective ones (*Kingdom of the Spiders*) and some terrible ones (*Night of the Lepus*).

Thirdly, one must return to Mr. Ebert's comment about *The Happening* weaving a spell. There are moments in the film—particularly the nasty ones—that are downright mesmerizing, even trance-like in presentation. Even in vetting what some viewers obviously consider a poorly conceived film or narrative, Shyamalan proves impressive in his compositions and staging. There's a fatalistic waiting-for-the-other-shoe-(or body)-to-drop aspect of some death scenes here that prove chilling.

Of course, there are the deficits to describe too. The primary of which involves casting. Mark Wahlberg and Zooey Deschanel, as a couple, are a big step down from Bruce Willis and Olivia Williams in *The Sixth Sense*, Bruce Willis and Robin Wright in *Unbreakable*, and Bryce Dallas Howard and Joaquin Phoenix in *The Village*. By comparison, their characters—Eliot and Alma Moore—come across as superficial and silly. Wahlberg can be a strong screen presence (see: Dirk Diggler in *Boogie Nights* [1997], or *The Departed*), but he typically doesn't do well with genre material (see: *Planet of the Apes* [2001]) that requires him to come across as a deep thinker. Wahlberg doesn't typically project intelligence (or more accurately, intellect) in a way that feels convincing or believable. Deschanel also seems grievously miscast, too young, big-eyed, callow and distant to be a successful repository for audience identification. In a way, *The Happening* reveals how deeply M. Night Shyamalan relies on good actors to transmit his spiritual, humanistic narratives. Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson, Bryce Dallas Howard, Samuel L. Jackson, and Paul Giamatti all bring their "A" game to his films, and their presence lifts the material. Wahlberg and Deschanel don't accomplish the same feat.

Outside these inferior performances, *The Happening* is a fascinating apocalypse scenario in a decade of apocalypse anxiety, and a culture of fear. Doomsday comes for man not with tanks or nukes, but at the hand of something he takes for granted: Mother Nature. In *The Happening*, man's destruction—his destiny—is carried like a whisper on the wind. After the film shows the audience turbulent clouds roiling in the sky, people begin to behave strangely in Central Park. They stop, confused, acted upon by some unseen force, and begin to kill themselves in horribly violent ways. One woman on a park bench stabs herself with a hair pin. Later, at a construction site, bodies fall from skyscrapers in a sudden deluge. The ghoulish punctuation of this death scene involves the passage of a handgun from person to person, used in one suicide, then another, then another. Shyamalan's camera stays trained on the gun, not the final bloody act, as shots punctuate the soundtrack and bodies crumple. Despite *The Happening* to your heart's content, but these opening sequences are brilliantly orchestrated, revealing to the audience how reason, and indeed self-preservation, no longer matters to those affected by the neurotoxin. Again, it's worthwhile to note that Shyamalan has rarely if ever been so nasty in his imaginings before, tossing characters off ledges, and staging execution/suicides like some wicked game of musical chairs.

A later scene in the film is just as ghoulish, and dark. It depicts scared survivors of the "happening" using heavy weaponry to blow away two innocent children who happen to be knocking on their front door. Rather than help these kids, the unseen murderers resort quickly to bloody violence, and again, Shyamalan doesn't shy away from the gore, or the horror of the scenario. In this case, the point is clearly that man faces problems besides having his "self-preservation" mechanism flipped by a neurotoxin. Some humans are also clearly impacted by another devastating "plague"—lack of a necessary conscience, a lack of empathy for others. Who could murder kids at point blank range? Again, we must ponder that no other film of Shyamalan seems so hopeless about humanity.

The horror scenes in *The Happening* work just fine, and, indeed, are necessary. Plants and toxins carried on the wind are not suitable villains, really, in terms of visualization. They can't walk or talk. They can't shoot or stab people. So, Shyamalan goes whole hog into the self-inflicted and human-against-human violence to showcase their impact. His sense of gallows humor appears in other scenes too. At one point, when Eliot and his group are visiting a model home in the countryside—a symbol of human encroachment on nature—a sign reads, on screen: "*You Deserve This!*" That comment could be interpreted two ways. It is meant to be an ad signifying that customers deserve the comfort and leisure

of the model house. At the same time, it is a notice that humanity “deserves” what it gets because of its poor stewardship of the wild, and of the planet as a whole.

Again, this isn’t typically a side of Shyamalan seen at the movies, so *The Happening*, especially in its opening sequence, is a refreshing change of pace. Or perhaps it might be considered a development or evolution of the dark ideas he has carried in his films, but not really depicted head-on. The early scenes in New York City and Philadelphia give the film the gut-kick that it needs, the visceral punch that keeps viewers on the edge of their seat for much of the running time.

When this author discusses an over-the-top or exaggerated response to *The Happening*, it’s much like the response to the aliens-harmed-by-water subplot of *Signs* (2002). Specifically, many critics and viewers apparently can’t bring themselves to suspend disbelief in the film’s central idea that plants are rebelling against the human race. Yet it is helpful to remember that a plant revolution or attack on humanity is not a new idea in the genre. Think about classics like *Day of the Triffids* (1961), for example. *The Happening* takes on an idea that has been explored in the horror and sci-fi genres for generations (notably in *One Step Beyond*’s “Moment of Hate” and *Space:1999*’s “The Troubled Spirit,” to name two TV series). And as noted above, the film also qualifies as a revenge of nature horror movie, in the spirit of efforts like *Frogs* (1972), *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977) and *Day of the Animals* (1977). Horror fans know this meme by heart: *man’s pollution causes nature to go haywire in response and self-correction*. Perhaps the closest antecedent for *The Happening* is Alfred Hitchcock’s masterpiece, *The Birds* (1963). There, a swarm of birds suddenly and inexplicably went on the attack and nearly took out an entire town. There was no explanation for the battle and the bird assault ended as mysteriously as it began. *The Happening* provides an explanation (and the intrepid viewer can judge whether that’s a good or bad thing, but just imagine if Shyamalan had provided no explanation for the attack), and also a warning that the attacks will recur until mankind changes his ways. This final warning is the oft-seen “call-to-action” element of revenge of nature films; the warning that man is tampering in God’s domain, or that it’s not nice to fool with Mother Nature. *The Happening* therefore fits into a pre-existing movie tradition, and is not an exception to tradition or history, as some critics would ask audiences to believe.

And what of the film’s science? Well, consider some of the plot elements. It has been scientifically proven that plants do respond to human stimulus, so that aspect of the film is factual, and indeed, this idea goes back to that *One Step Beyond* episode noted above. Similarly, science has proven that plants can emit toxic compounds. Where the movie gets into some problems with plausibility is its discussion of evolution. Individual populations don’t evolve, only species evolve over time. The film appears to suggest that plants have just evolved, individually and collectively, to turn against humans, and that doesn’t seem to have any basis in reality, or in a current understanding of science. Similarly, one must wonder if there isn’t a difference between having your self-preservation switch turned off, and actively trying to kill yourself. In other words, you might have no sense of danger, yet still not stick knitting needles in your throat. But you know, *The Happening* isn’t especially or egregiously off base. Especially when you accept what passes for science in other major films.

So, once more, it is telling that Shyamalan’s films are held to a standard that other genre films are not. The question is: why? Why punish an individual filmmaker, working on a much smaller budget, for his creative trespasses, but forgive big franchise moviemakers for theirs? Understanding the response to *The Happening* hinges on this issue. Is *The Happening* really that ridiculous?

Not all the time. No.

But in at least one scene, yeah, it is. I have to admit it. The scene in which Elliot approaches and attempts to soothe a house plant is a perfect storm of dreadfulness. Mark Wahlberg is terrible in this scene, talking calmly to the plant, which turns out to be plastic. When people claim the movie is bad, this is the moment they most vividly remember.

This author has received and duly read the memo that we’re all supposed to treat *The Happening* like a joke in perpetuity, but consider the following: There’s nothing to be gained by taking that route in this review. There are plenty of reviews which dismiss, bash, and make-fun of the film all over the net. Read and enjoy them! But for this book, the author insists that *The Happening* is a frequently entertaining and ambitious film that could have been, without a doubt, much, much better. But *The*

Happening starts strong and ends strong, in terms of the denouement, the film reveals a human race in complete denial, having learned no lessons about its treatment of the planet. Even with characters outrunning the wind, and talking to plastic plants, that close-up look at blind, foolish denialism is as realistic and powerful—and prophetic?—as any “monster” in any horror film ever made.

The Haunting of Molly Hartley (DTV) * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Haley Bennett (Molly Hartley); Chace Crawford (Joseph Young); Shannon Woodward (Leah); Shanna Collins (Alexis White); Marin Hinkle (Jane Hartley); Jake Weber (Robert Harley); Josh Stewart (Mr. Draper); Nina Siemaszko (Dr. Emerson).

CREW: A Liddell Entertainment Production of a film by Mickey Liddell, *The Haunting of Molly Hartley*. Casting: Joseph Middleton. Production Designer: Anita Cabada. Director of Photography: Sharone Meil. Music: James T. Sale. Film Editor: Zene Baker. Producers: Jennifer Hitton, Jenny P. Jacobs. Written by: Rebecca Sonnenshine, John Travis. Directed by: Mickey Liddel. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A teenager, Molly Hartley (Bennett), attends her first term at Huntington Prep after her mother (Hinkle) is institutionalized for a “*probable psychotic disorder*,” and is diagnosed with a tumor in her sinuses. The tumor is removed, but Molly continues to experience disturbing auditory hallucinations. Even as she grows attracted to Joseph (Crawford), a popular boy in school, and befriends Alexis (Collins), a born-again Christian, she grows disturbed about her upcoming 18th birthday. When her mother escapes from custody and tells Molly that she and her father (Weber) made a pact to give Molly to the devil upon the teen’s adulthood, Molly grows desperate to prevent the hand-over to Satan. Unfortunately, there are allies of the devil all around, including in the guidance counselor’s office.

COMMENTARY: *The Haunting of Molly Hartley* is a milquetoast, PG-13 horror film that, while largely forgettable, is not nearly as bad as its reputation suggests. The film features a few good jump scares, namely with a bird early on, and a dog, mid-way through, and relies on a decent central performance from Haley Bennett. The problem is simply that the film doesn’t really bother to feature any terror that will linger in the memory beyond the opening credits. In the 2000s, there were several films about people grappling with an evil calling or destiny, and none of them were very good. They bear titles such as *Bless the Child* (2000), *Lost Souls* (2000), and *The Calling* (2000), to name but a few. *The Haunting of Molly Hartley* also over-relies on the same type of horror technique—the stay awake shot—which appears in the film at least three times. The stay awake shot, as I’ve termed the cliché, and described in the review for *The Eye* is the image of a character awakening, sweating in their bed, after realizing that the previous jump scare was just a dream. It has been a staple of mainstream horror since at least the 1980s, but the trope is asked to carry a lot of the horror here.

The Haunting of Molly Hartley starts off well, with a prologue about another young woman, about to turn 18, promised to Satan, and the steps her father takes to avoid that destiny. It’s memorable and ends with a car accident and a violent stabbing with shards from a broken mirror. Then the same cycle repeats, only with Molly, and her far-less concerned father, played by *Dawn of the Dead*’s (2004) Jake Weber. The rest of the film is a kind of sub-par, but not exactly terrible rendering of *Rosemary’s Baby*, with Molly discovering her demonic destiny and finding both allies and enemies in her desire to escape from it. The film is not deep. It does not use its high school setting to make a point about adolescence and horror, for example. Even though Molly attends a wealthy preparatory school, there is similarly, no commentary on wealth and privilege in America. There is a born-again Christian in the film named

Alexis, but her behavior—including attempted murder—is not contextualized in terms of the hypocrisy between her religious ideals and her behavior.

Because of its lack of genuine terror, and teenage setting, *The Haunting of Molly Hartley* has often been compared to an episode of a TV series, and the comparison has merit. The plot line feels like something that should be developed over a series of one-hour episodes, not a narrative that is resolved well in the movie's scanty run time. Indeed, a series called *Point Pleasant* (2005–2006) about a teenage girl who discovers she is the Anti-Christ, is an example of how similar material was handled in the same decade, on video. Perhaps it isn't fair to pillory *The Haunting of Molly Hartley* for feeling just kind of ho-hum, or run-of-the-mill, but the film isn't memorable or deep, though it is also not the worst way to spend an hour and a half.

What could have made the film better? Perhaps some knowledge that to be a part of the “system,” like Molly is, you sell your soul a little every day. But this film doesn't want to be provocative in terms of themes, or even in terms of horror. It is satisfied to tread its way through high school horror in a thoroughly rote way. If the film had some humor about its own approach to the high school milieu and the repetitive, seemingly endless, prison-like nature of the institution, even that would have enlivened things.

LEGACY: A direct-to-video sequel, *The Exorcism of Molly Hartley*, was released in 2015.

House * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“...mush-minded incompetence runs wild here...”—Ken Hanke, *Mountain Xpress*, November 12, 2008.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Bill Moseley (Stewart); Reynaldo Rosales (Jack Singleton); Julie Ann Emery (Leslie Taylor); Heidi Dippold (Stephanie Singleton); J.P. Davis (Randy); Lew Temple (Pete); Leslie Easterbrook (Betty); Pawel Delag (Officer Lawdale); Weronika Rosati (Mrs. Lawdale); Michael Madsen (State Trooper/Tin Man).

CREW: Lions Gate Entertainment, Roadside Attractions, Namesake Entertainment and More Entertainment presents *House*. Casting: Nicole Arbusto, Joy Dickson. Costume Designer: Violetta Jezewska. Production Designer: Wojciech Zogala. Special Effects: Lightcraft. Music: David E. Russo. Director of Photography: Marcin Koszalka. Film Editor Andrea Bottigliero. Producers: Joe Goodman, Ralph Winter, Bob Neutz. Executive Producers: Erik Goss, Dan Raines. Based on the novel by: Frank Paretti and Ted Dekker. Written by: Rob Green. Directed by: Robby Henson. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A married couple, Jack (Rosales) and Stephanie (Dippold) Singleton, bicker on the way to see a marriage counselor in Montgomery, Alabama. They are involved in a car accident in the woods, and after help from a mysterious state trooper (Madsen) make their way to the isolated Wayside Inn. There, they meet another couple that was involved in their accident. The couples soon contend with the strange folks running the Inn, Betty (Easterbrook) and Stewart (Moseley), and a local boogeyman, The Tin Man. They also begin to experience strange visions related to the calamities in their mutual histories.

COMMENTARY: *House* is yet another example of the road trip gone awry sub-genre that was so popular during the 2000s. Here, the detour to terror involves an Inn in rural Alabama called Wayside that is literally the waystation of between the living and the dead, between the mortal coil and the spiritual plane. Leslie Easterbrook and Bill Moseley—of Rob Zombie's Firefly Clan—appear here as the

inn's Satanic denizens, and a creepy figure called the Tin Man plays a murderous game with three rules for those who find their way to this purgatory. Basically, that game involves the figure demanding one dead resident by sunrise, or else all will die.

The Tin Man and the familiar faces from Zombie's oeuvre cloak the movie's real purpose or theme to some extent, which involves a spectral girl, and the trapped characters contending with their Earthly trauma and sins before, as spirits, they pass on to the next realm. The Inn, like the Last Chance Gas Station featured in so many road-trip terror movies, represents the borderlands between normality and terror, civilization and savagery, or even, in this case, life and death. The film's theme also involves guilt, as both couples who become trapped in the Wayside Inn are defined as sinners, and the house manifests those sins. Leslie, for example, was sexually abused by her uncle, and murdered him. Now she must confront that homicide. In a subplot that feels like an homage to *Don't Look Now* (1974), Jack contends with visions of a little girl in a red parka, seen occasionally throughout the inn. His daughter died, and he is being punished for his neglect.

The twist, alas, is one that any horror fan will see coming a mile away, which makes the film feel predictable and slow. In a development one might call the *Carnival of Souls* Syndrome, those who escape the Inn find out they were on the road to either Heaven or Hell, and by escaping the Tin Man, returned to their lives. One couple is not so lucky, and they die, and move on to their cosmic reckoning. Before the film arrives at its expected, long awaited revelation and denouement, it gets mired down in confusing details, including the creation of a Jack doppelganger, and a manifestation of evil that can only be described as black smoke. The presence of Easterbrook and Moseley together also contributes to the idea of this as a low-rent Rob Zombie, picture, but without the flair and imagination of *House of 1000 Corpses* or *The Devil's Rejects*.

Even the film's conclusion, that light destroys darkness feels very clichéd and simple, given all the weird details of the film's narrative. The film's final reckoning, that the experience was a near-death experience (or possibly an OBE: Out of Body Experience) is hardly a satisfying explanation for all the preceding action, and the tics and peculiarities of the plot and characters, which include devil worship, black magic, mirrors that offer no reflection, an axe-wielding Easterbrook, the aforementioned black smoke, doppelgangers and the Tin Man, who is constantly talked about in menacing terms ("He's using the house against you!" "He's wearing you out!" "He's making your murderers!").

One has to wonder how these particular nutcases got their hands on the Limbo or Purgatory Franchise. Wouldn't that be managed by a higher power, and if so, why make Purgatory look like a Southern Fried nuthouse?

The film's ultimate message is, if you're going to die and go to limbo, pray you don't do it in Alabama.

House deploys a number of horror tropes from the 2000s to vet its story, including the Wall of Missing People posters, a common sight in American horror pictures after the 9/11 attacks, when such posters were seen all over Manhattan, as families sought to find their missing relatives, who had not been accounted for after the Twin Towers fell.

More generically, much of the action depends on cell phones not getting reception, and in this case, that makes sense. There are no cell towers, one supposes, in purgatory. One can only wish such commonly seen ingredients were deployed to convey a more coherent story. For long stretches, the film seems to just meander around from one idea to the next, and never really galvanizes into something meaningful or cohesive. Those weaknesses established, the film boasts an intriguing look in terms of its color canvass and production design, and Moseley and Easterbrook are never less than compelling.

In the final analysis, *House*—which is not at all a remake of the William Katt 1985 horror film of the same name, for those who are curious—is a detour that is almost, but not quite, worth taking.

Inside (DTV) ★ ★ ★ ★

Cast & Crew

CAST: Aysson Paradis (Sarah); Jean-Baptiste Tabourin (Matthieu); Claude Lulé (Le Médecin); Dominique Frot (L'infirmière); Nathalie Roussel (Louise); François-Régis Marchasson (Jean-Pierre); Béatrice Dalle (La Femme); Hyam Zaytoun, Tahar Rahim, Emmanuel Guez (Police).

CREW: The Weinstein Company, La Fabrique de Films, BR Films, and Canal+, in association with Soficinéma present *Inside*. Production Designer: March Thiebault. Costume Designer: Martine Rapin. Music: François Eudes. Special Effects: BR Films, FX Cinema, Mac Guff Ligne. Director of Photography: Laurent Bares. Film Editor: Baxter. Producers: Verane Frediani, Franck Ribiere. Written by: Julien Maury, Alexandre Bustillo. Directed by: Alexandre Bustillo, Julien Maury. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In France, the expectant Sarah (Paradis) and her husband Matthieu (Tabourne) are in a terrible accident with another car, and Matthieu is killed. Four months later, on Christmas Eve, a grieving Sarah nears labor. However, a maniacal stranger visits her house by dark of night, determined to steal the fetus from her womb.

COMMENTARY: An unforgettable example of the New French Extreme, *Inside* is perhaps the goriest movie this author has ever watched. It is a blood-soaked, brutal masterpiece. The descriptor “uncompromising” is often utilized to convey the nature of the film’s extreme violence, and its apt.

The film is indeed uncompromising.

Inside may best be understood in terms of its historical context. The film is set during the Paris riots that occurred in the final months of 2005. The city erupted into sustained chaos as young, underemployed immigrants rioted over police brutality, living conditions, and a paucity of jobs. Although Islamic terrorism was widely blamed by some for the riots, investigations afterwards concluded that there was no evidence of Islamic terror, despite the ongoing War on Terror launched by the United States.

Close to 3,000 rioters were arrested, and roughly 5,000 cars were set on fire during the unrest. This era in world history—the 2000s—is often associated with xenophobia, the fear of the other. American films such as *Hostel* have been viewed in that light. Certainly, a fear grew rampant in many modern Western societies of non-western—read Muslim—influences taking hold within their borders, threatening western thought and traditions. To this day, a certain brand of reactionary politician gains adherents by ginning up fear of “Sharia Law” taking hold in the States, with no actual evidence to point towards such a shift happening.

In 2005, France grappled with the idea of an invasion within its borders, by people who weren’t fully “nationalized,” or French. Many of the rioters were Arab or sub-Saharan Africans. *Inside* takes this fear of invasion further, suggesting that the malevolent “other” lurking in French society wants not only to take jobs and destroy property, but literally take the country’s future by stealing an infant from the womb. In horror films, children or babies always represent tomorrow; the hope for the future. If they are subverted by evil, psychological (*The Bad Seed* [1956]), supernatural (*The Exorcist* [1973]) or environmental (*The Children* [1980]), the future is in question. A similar reading applies to *Inside*. The quest to control the future, our tomorrows, comes down to a bloody, sustained war between two women, with ownership of the fetus in Sarah the prize. At many points, the film cuts to shots of the fetus in utero as it is bumped, jostled and unsettled.

This is disturbing, to say the least.

Inside may indeed carry a xenophobic message, and yet the film is powerfully made. The filmmakers miss no opportunity to descend into picturesque carnage. Juxtaposition, thematic and visual, is always a powerful tool in horror cinema, and here it is deployed mercilessly. In terms of story, Sarah is destined to deliver her child on Christmas day, a fact which invites comparisons to the story of Jesus, suggesting the importance of her child (and its role of importance determining the future of western civilization, perhaps). Visually, the film doesn’t spare our feelings. The editor cuts from a shot of

the happy couple, Matthieu's hands on Sarah's belly, to a view of Mattheu's skull striking and cracking against the car windshield during the car accident.

Again, this film offers no quarter, no respite.

"I don't want to be alone with all this violence," Sarah notes at one point, and the film makes a point of her vulnerability, as the world outside her apparently safe, upscale home becomes a battleground. Scholar Alexandra West, author of *Films of the New French Extremity*, notes in her analysis of the film how the blood-soaked womb inside Sarah ultimately is reflected by the appearance of this home. "As the bodies pile up—there is a total of nine deaths in the film—over what appears to be a two-story, two-bedroom house, the walls also become encrusted with blood and flesh, creating ... a makeshift womb."³⁰

But what gestates in this womb is terror and monstrosity, and unrelenting violence. How, one might ask, can such a violent film with a xenophobic undercurrent receive such high praise from this reviewer, and others. It goes back to a key idea of the decade of the 2000s, and one discussed often in this book: blowback. Consider that American foreign policies are considered to be a motivating factor for the attacks of 9/11. Or that French domestic policies are to blame for the unrest of 2005. *Inside* begins with a devastating car accident in which the monstrous assailant, The Woman, loses her own baby. She is a monster (as terrorists might be described, appropriately, as monsters), but her campaign of destruction is precipitated by the transgression against her, the wrong she has suffered. Therefore, *Inside* is about blowback, about a terrifying campaign to write a previous wrong, even as that campaign destroys "the house," or in broad strokes, neo-liberal western culture.

Scratch the bloody surface of *Inside*, and it is more than a violent, brutal film, but a siege movie about the clash of civilizations, the galvanizing issue, indeed, of the 2000s. The film offers no release, no relief, and will leave the audience shuddering in disgust and terror.

Merry Christmas!

Lake Mungo * * * *

Critical Reception

"There is much to be praised about *Lake Mungo*—it's as much a mystery as a ghost story and little images here and there (particularly over the closing credits) make you want to go back and study the film again to see what you might have missed. Much of the film was improvised which both adds to the film and detracts from it—this cannot have been an easy film to edit. Some of the sad images once we start focusing on a dead girl's cell phone generally leave you feeling sadness both for the girl and her family. But there's a certain drag to the pacing at times as we find ourselves wondering what this film is all about. 'Is it a horror film or a documentary?' *This is Spinal Tap* could make things work as a 'mockumentary' by having incredibly funny bits—*Lake Mungo* doesn't have any incredibly scary bits. It's a little less engaging a film than its creators were probably shooting for. As jaded as this may sound, part of me thought there was enough of a story here that a more traditionally structured (and directed) film might have done it more justice. This viewer wanted it to be scarier than it was."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

"While horror is a genre that traffics largely in death, it's surprisingly rare for a film to address the aftermath and the effects it can have on those left behind. *Lake Mungo*, however, concerns itself almost solely with that notion and is a meditation on grief—how the dead haunt the living (perhaps literally), and how the living can alleviate their guilt and remember while also learning to let go. It is a somber and heartbreaking entry in the found footage subgenre, and it's also one of the most terrifying.

Lake Mungo is presented as a documentary concerning the Palmer family and their attempts to cope with the drowning death of 16-year-old daughter Alice and the possibility of her supernatural return. Alice had secrets, we are told, and as they are revealed the Palmer family must also come to grips with the fact that they didn't know the daughter they lost as well as they thought they did. This throws their grieving process into disarray, of course—who are they mourning?—and their world goes even more topsy-turvy when it seems that their son captures Alice's ghost on video, standing in the family's backyard.

This film is so well-acted and well-constructed (writer/director Joel Anderson utilizes videotape, Super 8, still photographs, and news reports) that it's easy to forget that this is a work of fiction and the Palmers are

not a real family. It is quiet and captivating, and viewers may not realize how much tension is building as Alice's story unfolds until it all comes to a head and they're hit with a shocking, horrifying image. *Lake Mungo* worms its way under the skin almost unnoticed ... but once it's there it stays there until we, like the rest of the Palmers, are haunted by Alice's sad end and her ghostly image."—Stacie Ponder, horror scholar and blogger.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Rosie Traynor (June Palmer); David Pledger (Russell Palmer); Martin Sharpe (Matthew Palmer); Talia Zucker (Alice Palmer); Talia Lentini (Georgie Ritter); Cameron Strachan (Leith Ritter); Judith Roberts (Iris Long); Robin Cuming (Garret Long); Marcus Costello (Jason Whittle); Chloe Armstrong (Kim Whittle); Carole Patullo (Sergeant Drouin); John Dunn, Laurie Dunn (Funeral Directors); Kirsty McDonald (Genevieve Trudeau); James Lawson (Frederick Rosskamp).

CREW: After Dark Films, Lionsgate, Mungo Productions, Screen Australia, and SBS Independent presents *Lake Mungo*. Casting: Dina Mann. Production Designer: Penny Southgate. Costume Designer: Michael Chisholm. Special Effects: Justin Dix, Weta Digital, Complete Post. Music: David Paterson. Director of Photography: John Brawley. Film Editor: Bill Murphy. Producers: Georgie Nevile, David Rapsey. Executive Producers: William Coleman, Gilbert George, Robert George. Written and Directed by: Joel Anderson. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A documentary film crew records the story of the Palmer family. Alice Palmer, a young woman, drowned in a lake on December 21, 2005, while out swimming with her family. Her friends, parents, and brother Matthew (Martin Sharpe) grapple with Alice's death, and her mother desperately seeks closure. To help her achieve that, Matthew creates hoax videos suggesting that Alice's ghost is nearby, and still interacting with the family. After Matthew's hoax is exposed, however new footage comes to light, involving Alice's sexual dalliances with neighbors, and her attempts, months before her death, to contact a psychic about something terrifying she witnessed at Lake Mungo, where she buried her cellphone. Determined to know the truth, the Palmers head to Lake Mungo, and excavate the phone. On it, they watch a video of an encounter seemingly impossible, one that made the sensitive Alice realize her days here on Earth were numbered.

COMMENTARY: *Lake Mungo* (2008) is a heart-wrenching, and frightening mock-documentary horror film, "found footage" in nature. It's a first person-styled film, with the camera serving as a key actor, recording life as it unfolds. The film also features talking-head interviews, recovered footage (from a cellphone), and more. The film dramatizes, without sensationalizing, the story of an Australian family, the Palmers, grieving after the drowning death of an adolescent daughter, Alice (Zucker). But Alice's death is only the beginning of a bizarre and terrifying odyssey that involves the human desire for closure, the inescapable fact that death brings separation, and even the idea that humans can never really "know" another person, even those they love.

Crafted with a high degree of restraint, *Lake Mungo* grows continuously more intriguing the longer it runs, peeling open, like the layers of an onion, before the viewer's eyes. One scene, set at Lake Mungo during blackest night, is incredibly eerie in execution, and the film's denouement, a radical reconstruction of reality to accommodate our desire to believe that "*death is not the bitter end*" serves as an emotional catharsis; a reckoning that even if ghosts exist in this plane of existence, they remain worlds apart from those they loved in this mortal coil.

The film's valedictory images are shocking too—because viewers wonder how their eyes could have missed such evidence of the supernatural—but they also feel haunting, and strangely elegiac. Loneliness can be forever the film seems to warn. *Lake Mungo* provides the viewers no easy answers about its mystery, but the film's final images reveal everything the audience needs to know about what happened to Alice, and where she is ... *right now*.

The film isn't just about shaky cams running through the woods. Contrarily, the documentary

approach asks the audience to maintain its cold, dispassionate distance from the subject matter, even as the evidence of the supernatural grows ever closer, and ever more disturbing. The film includes many talking head “confessional” interviews with the main and subordinate characters, an excuse for an omnipresent camera (the making of a documentary), and then a number of other video sources that propel the narrative forward. In this case, there is a video of Alice in her dalliance with the mysterious neighbors, and the shocking, inexplicable cell phone footage, revealed at the film’s denouement. From the documentary format, *Lake Mungo* gets a lot of good B-Roll footage that adds to an understanding of the characters, such as family photos and films from Alice in her childhood. There are no real special effects to speak of though some gruesome make-up is featured at one point, and also, clearly, some photos get doctored for the aforementioned climatic montage.

One of the film’s most interesting moments involves Matthew explaining—and showing the audience—how he staged his ghost hoax videos with trick photography. This explanation is so good that it feels like a gut punch when, at the end of the film, the photos he used in his quest to provide his mother “closure” reveal something wholly unexpected, and counterintuitive. He thought he was tricking his family. But he wasn’t seeing the whole picture.

When is a hoax not a hoax?

When a ghost is right there, in front of your eyes, and yet you still don’t see it.

Lake Mungo does not concern light or easy topics. The film is deadly serious in that regard. Alice’s mom feels guilt and loss, and at one point recalls a conversation with Alice about a dream in which her daughter came to her for help and wasn’t heard. Late in the film, in a creepy but lyrical scene, that moment—*actually a premonition*—is played out not between living daughter and mother, but ghost and mother.

The film concerns the idea of closure; something we humans often don’t get. In some circumstances, it can be impossible to achieve. Mrs. Palmer arrives at some sense of closure, one might assume, but the film suggests that Alice does not. That her prison of loneliness is far more lasting than Mrs. Palmer’s grief or mourning. If one seeks metaphor or subtext in horror films, there is one here, for certain. Often, those who have acted in a way not accepted by society or family—especially in the sexual realm—are ostracized by their loved ones. Or worse, they carry feelings of guilt and shame that makes it impossible for them to meaningfully interact with their loved ones. Alice, a ghost in the film, realizes a very similar fate. Her secrets become known, and she fades away, present but invisible; but a ghost on the periphery of the family.

The phenomenon at the heart of *Lake Mungo*, seen in the cell phone video, is one that has been reported anecdotally and in parapsychological literature for years, even decades: *the doppelganger*. It might be defined as an “astral” or “etheric” counterpart of the physical body. The lake—a body of water—may be crucial to Alice’s experience with this apparition too. She encounters the doppelganger when she is at Lake Mungo and she dies, also, near a body of water; near a dam, in Ararat. Is the water the conduit for her terrifying vision?

The movie doesn’t explain it all, and *Lake Mungo* spoon-feeds its audience nothing. Instead, it asks viewers to assemble the pieces themselves. *Lake Mungo* provides no real explanations for why this has happened to Alice, but rather focuses on how her death adversely affects the family. Even if ghosts don’t linger when loved ones pass, memories certainly do. That’s a key truth presented in the film. The presence of memories, like spirits, prevent closure, make family members hold onto hope, and in this case, treat Alice’s bedroom like a shrine. They keep it untouched. The Dad imagines encounters with her in the house. Matthew becomes obsessed with Alice, putting her in his videotapes so as to keep her “memory alive.” But why? To deny the truth that she’s gone? To assuage some sense of guilt that they couldn’t save her? To feel comfort that some part of her continues? *Lake Mungo* is about the irrational impulses that humans feel when they lose those they love. Perhaps those who suffer grief would be comforted, oddly enough, by a ghost, because its presence means that death is not the bitter end.

There’s a creepy paradox at work in the film, regarding this point. Alice’s family keeps looking for an “omen” that she is still with them, in some spectral sense. But Alice learned she would die—and gave up living—precisely because she saw just such an omen. *Lake Mungo* explores what the “*end of hope*” is

really like, for ghosts and people alike, and in the process gives genre fans a masterpiece of understated, cerebral horror and one of the best found-footage horror movies ever made.

Let the Right One In ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Deliciously macabre yet beautifully tender, Tomas Alfredson's superb vampire movie is everything *Twilight* wishes it was..."—*The Daily Telegraph*, February 15, 2012, page 33.

"Wow. It is rare that a horror film, much less a vampire film, can get to the emotional depth of *Let the Right One In*. The loneliness of a vampire, one accustomed to exploiting others not just for blood but also to enable access to victims, is at the heart of this film. It's almost a companion piece to George A. Romero's *Martin* (1976)—but *Let the Right One In* goes for emotional places that even *Martin* never reached. The loneliness of someone who is NOT a vampire, but is bullied, is also at the heart of this film, and that is where our two main characters meet, in their pain, in their isolation. Along the way we have some gruesome scenes of blood-harvesting and an amazing sequence in a swimming pool where the bullied human boy Oskar's enemies are methodically slaughtered by Eli, the androgynous vampire, under stark light, perhaps inspired by the famous pool scene from *Cat People* but now instead of in scary shadows we have brightly lit underwater images that are not easily forgotten. It's *My Bodyguard* with the ultimate payback for bullying behavior.

This is in many ways a lovely film in spite of its gore, a gentle film in spite of its violence, and amazingly, a touching and warm film in spite of the cold, empty horizon it expresses as the universe in which its characters live. The relationship of Oskar and Eli moves beyond sexual, beyond friendship, into something a little disturbing, a relationship of mutually preferred exploitation, but in such an empty life, these characters find substance where they can

This was one of those films that halfway through it you can't wait to spread the word to others that this is a must watch, even with the subtitles (just to be clear, I don't mind subtitles at all). Definitely one of my favorite vampire films of all time."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kare Hedebrant (Oskar); Lina Leandersson (Eli); Per Ragnar (Hakan); Henrik Dahl (Erik); Karin Bergquist (Yvonne); Peter Carlberg (Lacke); Ika Nord (Virginia); Mikael Rahm (Jocke); Karl-Robert Lindgren (Gosta); Anders T. Peedu (Morgan); Pale Olofsson (Larry); Cayetano Ruis (Magister Avila); Patrik Rydmark (Conny); Johan Somnes (Andreas); Mikael Erhardsson (Martin).

CREW: Magnet Release, EFTI, Filmpool Nord, Sveriges Television, WAG, Canal+, Fido Film AB, Ljudiglan, and The Chimney Pot presents *Let the Right One In*. Casting: Anna Zakrisson. Production Designer: Eva Noren. Costume Designer: Maria Strid. Special Effects: Fido Film AB, Panorama film and teatereffekter, The Chimney Pot. Music: Johan Soderqvist. Director of Photography: Hoyte Van Hoytema. Film Editors: Tomas Alfredson, Dino Jonsater. Producers: Carl Molinder, John Nordling. Based on the novel and written for the screen by: John Ajvide Lindqvist. Directed by: Tomas Alfredson. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 116 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1980s Sweden, a lonely boy, Oskar (Hedebrant), is neglected by his separated parents, bullied at school, and obsessed with the murder and violence he sees in the culture around him. He soon makes the acquaintance of another apparent child, Eli (Leandersson), who is actually an ages-old vampire, who needs to be cared for. Oskar and Eli form a close friendship, even as Eli's caretaker, Hakan (Ragnar), botches his quest to procure her latest victim. When Eli contends with Oskar's bullies, he comes to make a choice about how he wants to spend his future.

COMMENTARY: The vampire coming-of-age movie *Let the Right One In* commences and culminates with a mood befitting its wintry visuals: bleak and despairing. At first blush, the snow seems a beautiful

blanket, coloring the Earth with pure white. But as the audience learns, the snow is just a surface. Beneath it are layers of despair.

This is Oskar's (Hedebra) universe. He's a twelve-year-old boy living in a depressing apartment complex in blue collar Stockholm in the early 1980s. Oskar's skin complexion is as alabaster white as the never-ending snow, and his life is as relentlessly bleak, his chilly personality as mysteriously opaque. Oskar's mother doesn't really want him around, at least not when something good is playing on TV. And Oskar lives away from his father, who drinks too much and may prefer to be with his gay lover than with his only son. Sensitive and highly intelligent, Oskar misses his Dad terribly, a fact the audiences realize when the child fleetingly grasps his father's jacket and inhales his dad's scent as though it's some long-lost treasure, a nostalgic remembrance of better times

At school, Oskar's classroom lessons dwell on the dark side. A policeman lectures in class about drugs, but the officer lingers lasciviously on murder, creating the impression it is tantalizing and romantic. Meanwhile, pre-adolescent thugs make Oskar's life a perpetual misery, bullying him every day and making him "*squeal like a pig*." The bullying isn't typical playground behavior, it crosses the line into real violence and sadism. Oskar keeps a knife on hand for self-defense, but so far has not been able to "*hit back*," to retaliate. Oskar copes with his lot the best he can. He "*reads a lot*" and maintains a thick scrapbook of true crime incidents. "*A senseless massacre in Beirut*," and "*No Survivors in Arab Massacre*" are the headlines that have captured his attention and found favor amongst his mementos. These moments early on in the film are important for the way they define Oskar's world. It is not a happy place.

A mysterious figure, Eli (Lina Leandersson), also captures his attention.

She is another 12 year old and she appears in Oskar's snowy apartment courtyard one night, atop a Jungle Jim as though some delicate bird of prey. Although Eli informs Oskar that she is not actually a girl at all, and that they can't be friends, a close relationship ensues. Eli urges Oskar to fight back against his tormentors at school, and Oskar accepts Eli for who she, or he, is. And who she is, or who she happens to be ... is a vampire. Oskar processes and accepts this fact without question, without even blinking. In a world of divorce, loneliness, bullies, massacres and murder, why shouldn't there be vampires too?

Let the Right One In is a horror movie by way of Ingmar Bergman film. It's a contemplative, deliberately paced meditation on loneliness, adolescence, friendship and adulthood. In terms of approach, the film by director Tomas Alfredson de-romanticizes the vampire genre to an extreme degree, one not seen, perhaps, since George A. Romero's *Martin* in 1976. The murders in the film are messy and chaotic, as ugly as the rest of Oskar's world is. Eli laps blood up hungrily off a dirty floor at one point, and her "guardian" (a possible pedophile) attempts one botched murder after another to procure her the nourishment she requires nightly. When he fails, he disfigures himself with acid so he can't be traced back to Eli. And now and then, when we catch random glimpses of Eli, she appears either physically mutilated, or extremely old.

Oskar and Eli are two lost souls, alienated from their society, who find each other and help each other get through the harshness of life the best they can. So, when Eli states "*I must be gone and live, or stay and die*," Oskar sympathizes with her declaration. He knows that he can't remain in gloomy Stockholm because the oppressive snow, cold, and empty emotional life modeled by his unhappy parents will smother and kill him as surely as will the "dead" adult society which heartlessly stalks and hunts Eli, the unacceptable predator in its midst. The choice is simple, really. "*Stay in the courtyard*" as Oskar's mother demands or take a chance and "*let the right one in*" to his life and try to find some measure of happiness with Eli.

An indictment of an adult world which fails children on every level, *Let the Right One In* depicts how two adolescents might build an intimate connection, even in the most difficult circumstances. They do so, based on a mutual understanding of the things their lives lack: companionship, tenderness, security, and so forth. They are both outsiders, and form a bond based on their status as outcasts. After Eli's guardian, Hakan (Per Ragnar) fails to provide for Eli, she says, "*You were supposed to help me. Do I really need to take care of myself?*" The answer, at first, is *yes*, until Oskar comes along. Once he's in the

picture, the children will be able to take care of each other. They even develop a secret language, learning Morse Code so they can converse through walls, and, helpfully, through crates/coffins.

The film doesn't exactly end happy. That wouldn't be true to the universe established by the filmmakers. Certainly, the bullies get their violent comeuppance in a splendidly executed sequence involving a swimming pool and a camera positioned underwater. And certainly, Oskar and Eli have grown a connection together, but really, *what future do they have?* What future can they *possibly* have together? Oskar will grow up ... and Eli won't. Which will leave Oskar with the heartbreaking choice of either leaving Eli behind or becoming the next Hakan.

Not a happy or romantic option, to be certain. The "realities" of adulthood, the ones which destroyed Oskar's parents, will seek him out too. *In time.*

In fact, one possible reading of the film is very predatory, at least on Eli's part. Remember, Eli is incredibly old and experienced at this point in his/her life. With Hakan gone, the vampire needs a new assistant, a new procurer of victims, for easy survival. That's what the friendship with Oskar is all about. Eli sees in the boy someone who is so lonely that he will do anything. The society of bullies, and of murders, has prepared him to do her bloody work for her. If one chooses to view the film this way, it is really about a vampire picking its next human caretaker and not about a friendship of outsiders.

Given this reading of the film, the Eli/Oskar friendship is merely a temporary respite against the snow, the warmth of a fire that burns bright, but will fade to cinders all too soon. Perhaps, suggests *Let the Right One In*, that's the best humans can ultimately hope for. A temporary shelter before the next blizzard buries us as again in alienation and isolation, ugliness and violence. Perhaps all relationships, even friendships like Oskar's and Eli's, are actually transactional, based on the needs of the moment. Perhaps, like Oskar's parents, he has just found the cage that he can live comfortably within, at least for a time.

By all means, *Let the Right One In* to your life. It is a beautifully crafted, thoughtful horror film. But remember that the film, for its appearance as a story of friendship in a cruel world, hides a darker, bleaker tale of despair.

Martyrs (DTV) * * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Morjana Alaoui (Anna); Mylène Jampanoï (Lucie); Catherine Begin (Mademoiselle); Robert Toupin (Le père); Patricia Tulasne (La mère); Juliette Gosselin (Marie); Xavier Dolan-Tadros (Antoine); Jean-Marie Moncelet (Etienne); Jessie Pham (Young Lucie); Erika Scott (Young Anna).

CREW: The Weinstein Company, Canal Horizons, Canal+, CineCinema, Credit d'Impot Cinema at Television, Eskwad, TCB Film, and Wild Bunch present *Martyrs*. Casting: Helene Rousse. Production Designer: Jean-Andre Carriere. Special Effects: Buzz Image Group. Music: Alex and Willie Cortes. Directors of Photography: Stephane Martin, Nathalie Moliavko-Visotzky, Bruno Philip. Film Editor: Sebastien Prangere. Producer: Richard Grandpierre. Executive Producers: Frédéric Donigulain, Marcel Giroux. Written and Directed by: Pascal Laugier. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young woman, Lucie (Jampanoï), bruised and beaten, escapes from brutal captivity. Refusing to tell the authorities what she endured while a hostage, she befriends another young girl, Anna, at an orphanage. They grow up together, learning to lean on one another, despite Lucie's instability and frequent attempts at self-mutilation. Fifteen years later, an adult Lucie breaks into what seems a normal suburban family home, and murders the entire family there in cold blood, using a shotgun. She believes that somehow the parents in that house are connected to her torture more than a decade earlier. Anna has her doubts, and Lucie, after committing the murders, kills herself. Anna

discovers, however, that Lucie was correct. Underneath the normal exterior of the home is a laboratory—or dungeon—where a strange cabal tortures and brutalizes an emaciated, cut-up woman. Anna attempts to nurse the victim back to health, but too much of the victim's humanity is already lost. And then the torturers return. Anna meets the Mademoiselle, the leader of this strange organization that believes suffering and pain in some extraordinary individuals will lead to martyrdom, to the witnessing of the afterlife, and perhaps even God's existence. Anna now undergoes that process, enduring days and weeks of grueling pain and suffering. Finally, Anna becomes a witness, and reveals to the Mademoiselle what she saw on "*the other side*."

COMMENTARY: *Martyrs* (2008) is a controversial and incredibly gory torture porn horror film of the New French Extreme. Upon its theatrical release over a decade ago, the film from director Pascal Laugier fiercely divided critics. Some reviewers felt it was gratuitous and over-the-top in its violence and cruelty. Others believed that *Martyrs* carried significant social value, and that there was, indeed, an artistic point to all the terrible, graphic violence.

Importantly, the savage cinema is all about pushing boundaries and breaking taboos. It's about the very idea that the actions we deem ourselves incapable of committing, or contending with, become necessary in the face of extreme, unrelenting violence. Viewed in this way, *Martyrs* is a textbook example of the format. The violence in the film is absolutely staggering, but the violence is not the whole story.

Historically, *Martyrs* arises from the epoch of torture porn films like *Hostel* (2005) or *Saw* (2004), but in wholly unique manner, Laugier's film actually suggests apotheosis, not degradation. The key idea underlining the movie is that some people transcend their harsh reality when they face incredible suffering and pain. Moving beyond pain, they see God, or cross-the-veil to another world. When they return to this mortal coil, they offer their testimony about what they saw in the Hereafter. In short, these sufferers become more than mere "victims" of savage acts. Instead, they become "witnesses" to the divine order of the universe. And what they witness apparently provides a sense of relief, joy, or even ecstasy. This is a controversial idea to portray in a horror film, and rightly so. Taken abstractly, the noblest idea is that suffering has an end, a light at the end of the tunnel; and that this end to suffering is a doorway to understanding the mysteries of the universe. When faced with extreme, pain, terror and agony, the end is not just more agony and nothingness. The end is transfiguration. Fear is left behind, replaced by knowledge. Taken literally, however, the movie might be interpreted by some as a validation for abuse or violence. When you hurt somebody, perhaps they will transcend the pain you caused, and come out of the experience having grown or evolved. So, you did them a service by hurting them, right?

Well, not exactly.

One can see how some scholars and critics have read the film in that fashion, and this author is sensitive to the notion that these same interpreters see the film as a validation of violence, in particular, towards women. Why? Because, as the film suggests "*women are more responsive to transfiguration*" than men are. Yet, contrarily, this reading does not take into consideration the full picture of *Martyrs*. In some way, the film is about finding a way to endure, to win, when, frankly, there is no real way to win. When facing the possibility of only further suffering in this world, some people transcend; they put fear and pain aside. "*You're not scared anymore*," a character notes of the central martyr figure. Anna can't escape her captivity. She can't return to her life. She can't stop the brutal beatings. But no longer can she be victimized, hurt, or controlled, either, at least spiritually, or emotionally. In the final act, one can rightly make the claim that she has transcended herself, and escaped, even if only in her mind. If this is indeed the film's point, the pro-social message is plain. Many people, including women and men, may be trapped in situations without ready escape or outlet. Life may be unbearable, physically or emotionally. Their lives may be cruel and inhumane. Unceasingly so. But even in that state, the spirit is indomitable. It quests for—it seeks out—a place of peace, enlightenment and joy. Some people can make it there. Others can't.

The key is what is inside you.

A key facet of *Martyrs* is the film's definition of the titular term. In a traditional definition, a martyr is someone who suffers persecution, and refuses to renounce a belief, even under extreme duress. The movie, however, chooses a different, less well-known definition. It characterizes a martyr as a "witness," someone who sees something and reports back what is seen. What is seen? Something characterized, in some instances, as proof, or evidence. But evidence of what? In the movie, the martyr is a witness to God's existence, or the existence of an afterlife. Given this definition, one can detect the complexity and symbolism of *Martyrs*' discourse. Consider the witnesses in the film for a moment. There is the primary sufferer, Anna (Morjana Alaoui), and the Mademoiselle (Catherine Bégin). Finally, *the audience is a witness too*. It sees all the violence, cruelty, and inhumanity at point blank range and must process it in such a way that gives it meaning, or purpose. In this way, the director makes his case. In the face of violence and pain, every person attempts to bring clarity and purpose to chaotic terrain, an absurd existence that seems purposeless. Ironically, the key to finding purpose is encoded in the controversial violence of the film. How do we grapple with *Martyrs*' incredible, upsetting violence? Is it pro-social commentary about human nature? Or is it sleazy, lurid violence that merely demeans women and the audience itself?

The answer is in the journey.

Keep doubting.

Director Pascal Laugier takes the audience on a harrowing journey of pain and suffering in *Martyrs*, making the audience wonder, or doubt, if there is a purpose to it at all. Viewers of this film see innocent children shot down in cold blood by the movie's ostensible protagonist, Lucie, in the first act. It witnesses a human being so cut-up, so starved, so brutalized, that she is barely recognizable as a human being. It sees Anna undergo a surgery in which her skin is removed from her body. It's all savage and utterly disgusting, and absolutely, utterly purposeful. What is that purpose. We are left, as individual movie-goers, to determine purpose for ourselves. Rather than spoon-feed the audience all the answers, the director of *Martyrs* reveals a parade of ultra-realistic horrors, *intimates* a purpose behind the surface, and then tells us, with a final gunshot exclamation point, to "*keep doubting*" if there is a purpose to it all. This is a perfect mirror for human existence, is it not?

Humans contend with the loss of loved ones to disease, accidents, war, or old age. Humans endure physical and emotional pain too and wonder what could be the reason. People seek certainty in religion, in spirituality, in human connection, but never know if the reward for this journey is merely oblivion, a winking out at the time of death, or some form of transcendence to another form of life. If there is an afterlife, or a God, or reincarnation, then people will have a certainty that life is worth the agony endured. But what if humans were to acquire that certainty in life, without the pain, without the struggle? Would they still strive to overcome the daily bombardment of tragedy and seemingly arbitrary suffering? Likely not, and that's the motivation for Mademoiselle's final edict to her second in command. She instructs him to *keep doubting*, because doubt—not certainty—is the very quality that gives meaning to human life. In her last moments of life, Mademoiselle gets her certainty, from Anna. She is the witness, or martyr, in other words, to Anna's testimony about the next world. One can't know if what she hears from Anna is good, or bad. The film does not reveal if Anna's revelation/testimony damns the Mademoiselle or saves her. What the audience can discern, definitively, is that Anna's testimony ends the Mademoiselle's quest. And without that quest, Mademoiselle kills herself, apparently having nothing left to live for. She has gone her whole life brutalizing others in search of certainty, a metaphor for fundamentalist religious dogma, and found that knowing the answer is not as satisfying, perhaps, as asking the question. Her advice to her second-in-command is neither cruel, vindictive, nor sadistic. It is genuine. If he wants to discover the path to self-knowledge, he must keep doubting. And by that, the film means doubting religion, belief, and every decision made in life. It is only through the process of doubting, which in archaic terms means "*having fear*" that existence here, on this plane of existence, is rendered meaningful.

The beauty of the film's denouement is that the director lands viewers in the shoes of the Mademoiselle's second command. Like him, the audience is denied Anna's testimony, and left wondering if the destination was worth the journey. The parade of horrors the film depicts leads viewers

to no good answer. Was it just to debauch people? Or was the brutality meant to keep people guessing, and seeing that, whether or not there is an afterlife, or God, they must make sense of the world on their own terms. Consider Anna's journey. She is estranged from her mother. She was abused as a child. She is alone, with no direction in life, which explains her co-dependent friendship with Lucie. Her reward for all of her suffering is simply more suffering. But perhaps it is her life of suffering that makes her able to "bear all the sins of the Earth" and see what lays beyond. One can't separate her martyrdom from her life experiences.

And, this writer must admit, this is where his doubt comes in. Does Anna actually see another world? Or is she, in the end, merely delusional? Is she simply dying, and her brain chemistry providing hallucinations or perceptions that are mistaken as "objective" visions of the afterlife, or God? There's a part of me that believes the whole film is about a fool's errand, the delusion of belief or faith. Why take Anna's word for what she sees, when it may be entirely a product of her mind, and her individual journey? The testimony she gives may be the testimony of a delusional, dying woman. The testimony is a result of biochemistry, not sure objective "truth."

Doubt, you see, has gripped me.

From a certain perspective, the entire film is a messy, shaggy dog story that demonstrates the foolhardiness of seeking objective evidence for religious belief. Perhaps there is no such evidence available to be gotten, at least at man's current stage of development. The religious mindset is about professing certainty, or having certainty (faith), and the fact is, nobody actually possesses that certainty. Those who profess it are liars. Extremely confident (or misguided?) liars.

In that regard, this author has no have certainty about *Martyrs*. There is only my viewpoint and perception of the film. And that perception suggests a conclusion. This a great, savage, torture porn horror film—one of the ten greatest of its decade—because it opens the doorway to so many interpretations. This is a movie that starts as a direct, pandering appeal to the gut. The film is stomach turning, and literally sickening. But *Martyrs* then ends with an appeal to the brain, a fiercely thoughtful meditation on the human condition, and the necessity to "keep doubting," so that life continues to carry meaning for those left on this mortal coil to experience it. I can't presume to tell you how you will feel about being a "witness" to this particularly savage journey, but for me, the journey is unforgettable.

The Midnight Meat Train * * ½

Critical Reception

"*Train* is nasty, but it's a gratifying kind of nasty—one you'll remember for its story as much as (if not more than) the carnage that story leaves behind."—Billy O'Keefe, *Tribune News Service*, February 17, 2009.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Bradley Cooper (Leon); Leslie Bibb (Maya); Brooke Shields (Susan Hoff); Vinnie Jones (Mahogany); Roger Bart (Jurgis); Tony Curran (Driver); Barbara Eve Harris (Detective Lynn Hadley); Peter Jacobson (Otto); Stephanie Mace (Leigh Cooper); Ted Raimi (Randle Cooper); Dan Callahan (Troy Taleveski); Donnie Smith (Station Cop); Earl Carroll (Jack Franks);

CREW: Lionsgate, Lakeshore Entertainment, Midnight Picture Show present in association with GreeneStreet Films presents *The Midnight Meat Train*. Casting: Nancy Naylor Battino, Kelly Wagner. Production Designer: Clark Hunter. Costume Designer: Christopher Lawrence. Special Effects: W.M. Creations, Furious FX, Luma Pictures, Look Effects, Barbed Wire, Sub/Par Pix, Spectrum Effects. Music: Johannes Kobilke, Robb Williamson. Director of Photography: Jonathan Sela. Film Editor: Toby Yates. Producers: Clive Barker, Gary Lucchesi, Eric Reid, Tom Rosenberg, Jorge Saralegui, Richard S. Wright. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Jason Constantine, Joe Daley, Anthony DiBlasi, Robert McMinn, John Penotti, David Scott Rubin, Fisher Stevens. Based on the short story *The Midnight Meat Train* by: Clive Barker. Written by: Jeff Buhler. Directed by: Ryuhei Kitamura. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Leon (Cooper) is an aspiring photographer who hasn't yet found his true artistic path. After some terse advice ("stay put, be brave, keep shooting...") from a local gallery owner and art connoisseur, Susan (Brooke Shields), Leon proceeds to nurture his dark side. Accordingly, he begins going out for night shoots on the gloomy, mean streets of the city. On one occasion, Leon even photographs a violent crime in progress, but rescues the victim. Then, circumstances lead Leon to a strange "butcher" (Vinnie Jones), a man who—every night—viciously murders passengers on a lonely train car after 2:00 a.m. He does so with a big, silver meat tenderizer, Leon delves deeper into the mystery of the butcher—who *seems to be immortal*—and becomes obsessed with the terror he witnesses, much to the chagrin of his supportive girlfriend, Maya (Leslie Bibb). Soon, Leon and Maya are both reckoning with the butcher, and the slowly dawning realization that the killer is part of an underground, secret society, one with the full support and assistance of the metropolitan police.

COMMENTARY: Over the years, movie adaptations of Clive Barker's visionary and disturbing literary works have run the gamut from great (*Hellraiser* [1987]), to fascinating (*Night Breed* [1990]) to disappointing (*Lord of Illusions* [1995]) to downright awful (*Rawhead Rex* [1986]). *The Midnight Meat Train* (2008) is the latest translation of Barker's written work, and it falls somewhere right in the middle of that spectrum.

Some key moments in Ryûhei Kitamura's film are so astonishing—*breathhtaking actually*—in their ingenious, imaginative presentation that one may be tempted to forgive the trespasses in narrative clarity and the overt lapses in consistency of tone (lapses caused, specifically, by CGI special effects design). Other moments, particularly a predictable, hackneyed ending, only serve to diminish the good will the film builds up.

Ultimately, *The Midnight Meat Train* serves as a literalization of the famous Friedrich Nietzsche quotation, "*when you look into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.*" By seeking out the ugly side of human nature for personal gain (artistic success, money and fame), Leon gives up, in a very real and permanent sense, his humanity. The dark is not something to be toyed with, and there are consequences for Leon's "stolen" shots of Evil.

In keeping with this Nietzschean motif, Kitamura does an extraordinary job capturing the alienating vibe and heartbeat of a modern city at night. It's a world of fluorescent lights, hellish steam arising from sewers and inscrutable strangers going about their secret business. If you've ever walked a deserted city street late at night, Leon's journey into the urban heart of darkness will resonate with you. There's a rapturous feeling of both freedom and anonymity here; the scintillating possibility that around one corner you could find salvation; around another damnation. But it's *your choice* which route to take, and you don't really understand the ramifications of your destination until you get there. *The Midnight Meat Train* is at its best when it plays off this idea.

After about the one-hour point, however, the movie's hypnotic spell starts to crumble, and Leon takes on the perpetual blank stare of a zombie, his true thoughts now as inscrutable and unavailable as those of the speechless butcher. There's a very good reason for this characterization in terms of plot, but the result is a burgeoning sense of distance from the narrative. As viewers, we find ourselves getting ahead of the story and figuring out where it is headed (even if we don't know how or why.). Genre films thrive on surprises, shocks and twists, and it's never a good thing when you have the time to put all the pieces together in your mind. So, *The Midnight Meat Train* really falters in the last act. Even the discovery of a Lovecraftian style social hierarchy and a frenetic outburst of depraved brutality and violence culminating with a ripped-out tongue can't rescue the film from the grinding predictability of the final shots.

Although *The Midnight Meat Train* deserves praise for some truly amazing and pioneering visuals, even these are hit and miss. There's an early murder set-piece on the train involving Ted Raimi. The CGI special effects are so terrible, so thoroughly unconvincing that they rip you out of the film's carefully constructed feeling of dread. One awful shot (of Raimi losing both eyes, in slow motion, in a torrent of digital blood) is so incompetent you start to think the movie is designed as a joke, one headed down the

path of parody. If featured just quickly, this moment might have worked better, but in full-on slow-motion photography, the moment lingers, and the movie loses credibility.

Yet—in the very same scene—Kitamura stages a decapitation in a most imaginative, dazzling way. He adopts the perspective of the *severed head*, and, it's a crazy, terrifying ride. In microcosm, this scene explains everything that is wrong and right with the movie.

One moment is terrible; the next is inspired.

Digital effects are “the thing” in the latter days of 2000s in the horror genre, but in a film so much about meat—*about flesh*—it seems that the “butchering” scenes should feel especially grounded in reality, anchored in the texture of blood, bone and skin. On occasion—in *fairness*—they are. There's a short, disgusting and effective scene, shot in attentive, unblinking close-up, in which the butcher removes the eyeballs, teeth and fingernails of a victim, and you can almost smell the horror of the abattoir. But the over-reliance on CGI for other critical kill scenes saddles the film with a cartoony feel that runs opposite to the very thematic core of the story. After all, much is made here of the fact that Leon is a vegetarian (he even brings his own tofu to a local grill), and that the further he delves into the terror of the butcher, *the more he is drawn to meat*.

The movie's bloody effects should mirror or augment that journey; they should be ... *gristly* and bound to the laws of gravity, not weightless and recognizably computer generated. In one scene, there's so much digital blood spray flying about that it actually distracts you from the action. That's unconscionable in a production that has toiled so hard to create the reality of a rolling, subterranean urban slaughterhouse. When special effects are so inappropriately rendered that *they actually undercut the very thematic conceit of a film*, there's a big problem.

The Midnight Meat Train is promising, if inconsistent. There's so much that's good—and downright *dazzling*—here, one hates to see it undone by poorly conceived effects and a grinding mechanical ending that recalls, more than anything else, *The Sentinel* (1977).

You want to love this film—the *speeding descent into a subterranean, urban hell*—but you end up feeling numb to it all. Call me a conflicted passenger on this one. I started out really enjoying this journey, but it ended up being just another commute.

Mirrors * *

Critical Reception

“Bad movies also have the ability to suck out the souls of the living, and director Alexandre Aja's ridiculous horror yarn will leave audiences feeling completely drained.”—*Express & Echo*, October 10, 2008, page 24.

“*Mirrors* has a wildly convoluted plot and a dubious ending, as do so many films of the genre. *Mirrors* also has juvenile jumps—boo!—and predictable scary bits, and it goes on far too long.”—Liz Braun, *The London Free Press*: “*Mirrors*, moody, menacing...” August 16, 2008, page C4.

“The longer the movie plays—and it seems to go on forever—the less sense it all makes. Some of the early scenes, set in the spooky store, are admittedly creepy, but by the third act, it's all reduced to confusing mess of mechanical plotting, explicit gore, flash-cut editing and shrieking sound effects.”—May Scott, *Columbia Daily Tribune*: “Easily forgettable ‘*Mirrors*’ reflects poorly on Sutherland,” August 21, 2008.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kiefer Sutherland (Ben Carson); Paula Patton (Amy Carson); Cameron Boyce (Michael Carson); Erica Gluck (Daisy Carson); Amy Smart (Angela Carson); Mary Beth Peil (Anna Esseker); John Shrapnel (Lorenzo Sapelli); Jason Flemyng (Larry Byrne); Tim Ahern (Dr. Morris); Julian Glover (Robert Esseker); Josh Cole (Gary Lewis); Ezra Buzzington (Terrence Berry); Donna Aida Stan (Alda Doina); Ioana Abur (Sister); Darren Kent (Jimmy Esseker).

CREW: 20th Century–Fox, Regency Enterprises, Castel Film Romania, in association with ASAF and Luna

Pictures presents *Mirrors*. Casting: Deborah Aquila, Jennifer L. Smith, Tricia Wood. Production Designer: Joseph C. Nemec III. Costume Designers: Michael Dennison, Ellen Miorjnick. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Rez-Illusion, Digital Dimension, Look Effects, Inc., AutreChose, and Michael Kaelin & Associates. Music: Javier Navarrete. Director of Photography: Maxime Alexandre. Film Editor: Baxter. Producers: Gregory Lavasseur, Alexandra Milchan, Marc Sternberg. Executive Producers: Marc S. Fischer, Andrew Hong, Arnon Milchan, Kiefer Sutherland. Based on the motion picture *Into the Mirror* by: Sung-Ho Kim. Written by: Alexandre Aja, Gregory Lavasseur. Directed by: Alexandre Aja. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 110 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Ben Carson (Sutherland) is a suspended NYPD detective suffering from post-traumatic stress after killing a man on the job. Carson is estranged from his wife, Amy (Patton) and their children, and attempting to beat his alcoholism. While living with his sister, Angie (Smart), Carson takes a job at a burned-down old department store in Manhattan, The Mayflower, and patrols the premises as the new nightwatchman. The last nightwatchman, Gary Lewis, was murdered in a subway. Very quickly, Carson begins to see horrible, traumatic visions reflected in the Mayflower's oversized and ubiquitous mirrors. These reflections are not simply horrifying, they are actually murderous, and come to haunt Carson over a period of nights. Of course, his disbelieving friends and family think he's officially a nutcase. When the demonic mirrors threaten Carson's family, he sets off on an investigative quest to locate a mysterious woman named "Anna Esseker," believing that she may hold the key to resolving the crisis.

COMMENTARY: Mirror, mirror on the wall, what's the most disappointing Asian horror remake of all?

It's Alexandre Aja's *Mirrors*, a lugubrious and turgid re-crafting of the 2003 Korean genre effort, *Into the Mirror*. Basically, if you've seen *The Ring* (2002), you've seen *Mirrors*. In both cases, an imperiled protagonist faces a supernatural threat that endangers children. In both cases, the evil originates with an apparently evil little girl in a mental hospital (Samara in *The Ring*; Anna Esseker here); and in both cases, the evil spreads like a contagion, either via videotape or, as here, in the looking glass. Both films involve an investigation into a dark and troubled personal history, one that leads to revelations from the Evil One's family members and old, forgotten medical records.

But the derivative and wholly predictable narrative represents the least of *Mirrors*' problems. As is the case in such inferior films as *The Eye*, the real deal-breaker is a total lack of internal consistency. In horror films of the rubber reality venue, in which consensus reality is shaken and stretched, internal consistency is absolutely vital. To provide two brief examples: Freddy Krueger must obey the laws of the "dream world" in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. The dream world is key to his power and his defeat. And Pinhead in *Hellraiser* is tied to the Lament Configuration puzzle box. He doesn't just show up when he wants to. Hands don't call him; desire does. In these and other rubber reality films, the filmmaker establishes the overarching rules of the battlefield, and sticks to them (with surprises included), so that audiences can understand the threat, and more importantly, accept the resolution. Create instead a rubber reality world with no rules, with no internal consistency, and it's all just phantasmagoria. There can be no adequate resolution because the parameters of Evil's power have not been established, let alone sufficiently explained.

Take, for instance, the monster in *Mirrors*. It adopts the form of reflections as people wander by the reflecting skin of the mirror. Once it captures your "image," it can kill you, by killing your image, your reflection. This dynamic is played out in the gory prologue. Gary Lewis spies his reflection in a mirror. Then, the reflection version of himself slits his throat. But the wounds show up on Gary, as well as on the reflection, and the real man bleeds to death. So that's the rule: you see your image die; you die. But then, *Mirrors* changes its mind. In one scene, Ben sees his reflection in a mirror as it draws a gun and shoots him at point blank range! But it's just an illusion. Ben doesn't get shot. So, a mirror glass shard, the thing that killed Gary is real, but the mirror bullet fired by the mirror Kiefer is not? This kind of thing happens again and again in the film. Early on, Sutherland relives a horrible conflagration and sees his reflection catch fire. But he's actually fine. Just his reflection burned up. Again, different rules at different times.

Another example is the utterly ridiculous scene involving Angela's murder. The camera depicts actress Amy Smart standing in front of her bathroom mirror. She leaves the sink, but her diabolical reflection creepily remains in the mirror, watching her take a bath. Then, the mirror version of Angela rips off her own jaw, and so the real Angela's jaw falls off too! In this example, Angela wasn't even looking in the mirror when this horror happened! So, you look in the mirror just once and it gets you? You don't need to be in the proximity, or watching? Or even have your eyes open? If that's the case, then why do Kiefer and his family spend so much time in the film painting over all the mirror surfaces in Amy's house? I mean, the mirrors have already seen Amy and the kids by this time, right? What's the point?

This discussion leads, alas, to a fairly significant instance of the movie's general incoherence. Consider: a long time ago, little Anna Esseker was possessed by a flesh-and-blood demon. The monster was finally "exorcised" into mirrors. Now, over fifty years later, the demon in the mirror is haunting men like Ben Carson and Gary Lewis because it wants them to locate Anna Esseker and, for lack of a better word, re-possess her. So, the film introduces a demon who is virtually invincible. He lives not merely ensconced in the mirrors of a department store, but can travel to any mirror, anywhere in the world, apparently, including those in subways and family homes. In these mirrors, the demon can make people kill themselves even if he catches sight of them just once (like Angela), and his victims don't even have to be looking at a mirror to be under the demon's evil sway (again Angela). Furthermore, the demon can't be destroyed, because the mirrors all magically heal after being shot at, cracked, or thumped with furniture. And heck, it isn't just mirrors where the demon can live. It also thrives in pools of water, which also reflect images. But this all-powerful demon desires to trade this existence—this invincibility—for the frail physical, flesh-and-blood body of an elderly nun (Anna Esseker), so that Kiefer Sutherland can beat that body, burn that body, shoot that body, and perforate it with a boiler room pipe?

The movie bears out this complaint in believability. The demon finally gets back into Anna's body and about two minutes later gets killed. Be careful what you wish for, demons! See how the movie's logic does not survive even the slightest bit of scrutiny? Even the small details seem off. For instance, how does the dead night watchmen, Gary Lewis, send Ben Carson a package, via UPS half-way through the movie? No only has Gary Lewis never met Ben (and even if he knew his name, how would Gary know Ben's address?) But again, Gary died in the movie's first scene, before Ben took the night watchman job! I didn't know UPS was now making deliveries straight from Hell.

Character motivation is way, way off in *Mirrors* too. The nun, Esseker, is totally resistant to helping Ben resolve the crisis. Not once but twice she refuses to help him even after looking at a photo of Carson's cute kids. The only way she'll go back to the Mayflower (or Matthews Hospital...) is at gunpoint, actually. Then, just one scene later, she's miraculously leading the charge. She gets to the Mayflower and is totally on-board, ready to sacrifice her life, barking orders at Ben about what, precisely, to do to summon the demon. There's a scene missing here: the one in which Esseker "embraces" the mission and isn't just Ben's hostage. Without that scene, her sudden and inexplicable change of heart is just another WTF moment in a film full of them. Why not offer the audience the bread crumb of one token scene in which Esseker ponders her vows, their meaning, and then has a change of heart?

Also, ask yourself this question: why doesn't Ben ever lead any of the Doubting Thomases in his life (friends and family) to the Mayflower and simply shoot the mirrors there in front of witnesses? Nobody believes him that the mirrors self-repair, and so he attempts to prove it by shooting another mirror at Amy's house. Which, of course, doesn't self-repair and therefore makes him look more like a raving lunatic. Well, why not call the demon's bluff, and go back to the Mayflower with an entourage of witnesses and shoot those mirrors? Either result in that case would have been a positive one for Ben. Think about this logically for a second. Either: (a) the demonic mirror wouldn't have called his bluff, and would have therefore been destroyed by the gunshots, or (b) the mirror would have indeed self-repaired, and Ben would have had the hard evidence of his story in the form of eyewitness accounts.

Mirrors is doubly disappointing given the level of talent involved. Kiefer Sutherland boasts a long, distinguished connection with the genre. From *The Lost Boys* (1987) to *Flatliners* (1990) to *Dark City*

(1998), the actor has done particularly well with horror and dark imaginings. But seven years of 24 has apparently rubbed off on him. In his first post-Jack Bauer horror film, Sutherland plays Jack Bauer. There's a really off-moment here in which Ben threatens the nun at gunpoint, and, well, all you see is Jack on his latest mission. All that's missing here is Chloe.

And Aja? This is his most undistinguished and disappointing work. There is nothing to mark this film belonging to Aja. Nothing to delineate it as special, different, inventive, original or even particularly frightening. *Mirrors* is pretty much on a par with low-rent material such as *One Missed Call* or *The Eye*. It's especially saddening that a premise so rife with potential is rendered so mind-numbingly stupid by a filmmaker as clearly talented as Aja remains. The idea of reflections, of "doubles," and of opposites, is one that could be quite powerful. Not to mention quite revealing in terms of human psychology. Lip service is paid to the concept here, but that's it. Offhand, this author can think of two films that do much better with the concept of mirrors as "portals of evil." The first is John Carpenter's underrated but utterly brilliant *Prince of Darkness* (1987). It gets the concepts right, using the mirror as the universe of the Anti-God. And the other film is a terrible movie, *Poltergeist III* (1988).

But here's the thing: as bad and as stupid as *Poltergeist III* surely is, the director there meticulously crafted all of his mirror scenes with doubles, with two-sided sets (the "mirror" in the middle bisecting it), and so there was a physicality and reality to the threat. Actors playing horrific reflections had to carefully mimic performances. In *Mirrors*, Aja takes the easy route and relies almost entirely on CGI. Bad CGI is everywhere. An early shot of the gothic Mayflower department store digitally inserted into modern Manhattan is unbelievably fake. Look, if you can't even manage a believable establishing shot of your primary location, how are you going to suspend disbelief for almost two hours? Short answer.... Aja doesn't. I hope the director didn't end up with seven years of bad luck after making this movie.

One Missed Call * *

Critical Reception

"...a complete lack of actual scares."—Magill's *Cinema Annual*, Cengage Learning, 2009, page 237–238.

"I'm not sure what part of the overtly stupid *One Missed Call* was supposed to be scarier: the herky-jerky pixilated apparitions resembling wan Japanese ghosts with icky hair? Or Margaret Cho in a bit part as a police detective?"—Dann Gire, *Daily Herald*, January 5, 2008, page 14.

"Imagine *The Ring* crossing its wires with *Final Destination* and hitting redial. Director Eric Valette has the sense to add humour to the horror, which, along with some decent makeup effects, makes the silly plot easier to digest."—Glenn Sumi, *Now Magazine*, January 3, 2008.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Shannyn Sossamon (Beth Raymond); Edward Burns (Det. Jack Andrews); Ana Claudia Talancón (Taylor Anthony); Ray Wise (Ted Summers); Azure Skye (Leann Cole); Johnny Lewis (Brian Souse); Jason Beghe (Ray Purvis); Margaret Cho (Mickey Lee); Meagan Good (Shelley Baum); Rhoda Griffis (Marie Layton); Dawn Dininger (Monster Marie); Ariel Winter (Ellie Layton); Sarah Kubik (Monster Ellie); Regan Lamb (Laurel Layton).

CREW: Warner Bros., Alcon Entertainment, Kadokawa Pictures and Intermedia Films present *One Missed Call*. Casting: Nancy Naylor Battino, Kelly Martin Wagner. Production Designer: Laurence Bennett. Costume Designer: Sandra Hernandez. Music: Reinhold Heil, Johnny Klimek. Director of Photography: Glen MacPherson. Film Editor: Steve Mirkovich. Producers: Broderick Johnson, Andrew A. Kosove, Scott Kroopf, Jennie Lew Tugend, Lauren C. Weissman. Executive Producers: Timothy M. Bourne, Josef Lautenschlager, Martin Schuermann, Andreas Thiesmeyer. Based on the novel by: Yasushi Akimoto. Based on the screenplay by: Minako Daira. Directed by: Eric Valette. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Beth Raymond (Sossamon), a psychology student studying “the post-trauma child,” begins to lose her best friends to a mysterious and vengeful presence from beyond the grave. This presence haunts cell phones, calling from the future, apparently, and specifying the exact date and time of the phone owner’s demise. With the help of police detective Jack Andres (Burns), Beth attempts to solve the crime fast. This is a necessity because she receives one of the haunted voice mails herself.

COMMENTARY: “What will it sound like when you die?” asks the tag-line for *One Missed Call*, a PG-13 remake of the 2003 Takashi Miike film (and an adaptation of the novel by Yasushi Akimoto).

The answer: *snoring*.

Forget one missed call; this movie is one missed opportunity: a flat, formulaic cliché-fest that resurrects all the elements audiences have already seen in the other, seemingly endless string of Asian remakes (*The Ring*, *The Grudge*, *Dark Water*, *Mirrors*, *The Eye*, and *Pulse* leap immediately to mind).

See if this premise sounds familiar: a little girl and mother with a tragic history are at the root of a supernatural mystery involving the “haunting” of cell phones in contemporary America. Everyone in a particular calling circle (in this case, attractive young adults of both sexes) thus receive voice mails that come replete with a recording of what said death will sound like, not to mention a creepy ringtone. And the ringtone is *truly* creepy, one must give the movie at least that much.

As much as this movie feels incredibly derivative, one must admit that it tracks with the underlying theme behind many of these Japanese remakes. It’s the idea of the mass media or modern technology as boogeyman. Each of these films features a kind of “viral” murder campaign, one often (as in the case of *The Ring*, *Pulse* and *One Missed Call*) carried out under the auspices of our modern conveniences and tools, whether videotape, the Internet or cell phones. The idea that the user can catch something (like, say, apathy...) from modern mainstream entertainment or cable news is another powerful one vetted by these films. You watch *Fox and Friends* too long and you *do* die inside.

The problem with *One Missed Call* is that viewers have seen all these elements so many times by now that there are no surprises to be had.

Technology pinpointing time of death? Seen it in *The Ring*.

A web of hot young victims loosely connected by their use of damaging technology? Seen it in *Pulse*.

A mother-child evil dynamic? Seen it in *The Ring* and *Dark Water*.

A curse that can’t be stopped, and that even circles round for the final girl? Seen it in *The Ring* and *The Grudge*.

A cop investigates? Seen it in *The Grudge*.

A curse appears to have passed without the obligatory death, only to claim a different victim than you expected, one who happens to look like (or actually is) Edward Burns? Seen it in *The Ring*.

Without exaggeration, this movie doesn’t serve up even one twist on this familiar material. If the characters proved especially interesting, or the horror especially egregious and graphic, the tired plot might pass muster. But the protagonists are off-the-shelf victims and the horror is restrained by the PG-13 rating. The film is also short (87 minutes or so), and the editing appears botched—like a lot of stuff was trimmed before release. For instance, the great Ray Wise shows up with important flourish in a dynamic supporting role (as a host of the reality series *American Miracles*) but then disappears from the film without a trace. Where did he go? Jason Beghe (*Monkey Shines*) also shows up as a charlatan exorcist, but his role is also strangely truncated, and his ultimate fate is not depicted or even commented on.

The biggest complaint with *One Missed Call*, however, is that the film does not play by any coherent set of rules.

In the first scene, for instance, the audience witnesses a brutal supernatural attack on a lovely African American woman near her backyard fishpond. After she is drowned, an innocent bystander—her cat—is also attacked, choked and drowned in a punchy “sting-in-the-tail” moment. As we learn later in the film, however, the only people (or life forms, we presume from the death of the feline) who can be killed by the caller from beyond the grave are those who have received personal voice mails. So how is a

viewer to explain the cat's murder? Does little kitty there own a cell phone too? Did the feline receive a voice message saying it would be throttled to death at precisely 3:03 p.m. or some such thing? This is a moment that is staged and executed beautifully as a jolt-scare, but which—upon reflection—makes absolutely no sense and worse, violates all the rules the film attempts to lay down. A crucial thing to remember about all horror movies: *they need to make narrative sense*; they need to establish rules and stick to them, so that—as the audience—we understand who is in jeopardy, when they are in jeopardy and why they are in jeopardy. It is then necessary for the filmmaker to “play” with those rules to surprise us; but they can't break the rules all together, or it's just ... meaningless chaos.

The film's end, which appropriates the climax of *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child* (1989) by the way, is another astonishing rule breaker. The evil is vanquished, dragged back to Hell we presume, by the custodian that Beth has freed from an abandoned hospital (the child's mother.) In one shot, we see the ghostly maternal force ripping the evil tyke right out of our dimension. Wow! Almost the very next shot, however, is a close-up of a cellphone dialing itself, indicating that the evil child is now seeking out a further victim.

So, which is it, movie?

Is the evil gone? Or is the evil still on the loose? This is one of the most ham-handed and abrupt transitions from climax to sequel set-up in the whole decade.

One Missed Call features a few authentic scares, particularly in the moments involving a surgical theatre and a vent shaft leading into a hospital basement (though even here, one will be reminded of the superior *Silent Hill*). There's absolutely no compelling reason to see *One Missed Call* because the same type of story is more competently dramatized (in ascending order of their quality) in the following films: *Pulse*, *Dark Water*, *The Grudge* and *The Ring*.

See one of those instead and make this one missed movie.

The Orphanage ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“...the lasting impression of *The Orphanage* is not one of fright. Instead, you exit the cinema in a fever of melancholia, wondering how long it will take you to shed the sensation of alarm. The film is less of a shocker than an adventure in anxiety, testing and twisting some of the classic studies in infantile curiosity...”—Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*: “Gone Missing—*The Orphanage*,” January 14, 2008, pages 86–87.

“First-time director Bayona and screenwriter Sergio G. Sanchez make it as a point of honor to take classic horror movie talismans—dark caves, lighthouses and cellars—and milk them for suspense as if they've never been milked before. It gives this otherwise deadly serious movie a playful aspect: We're invited to follow the clues—including an ornate bronze key—in Bayona's own artfully constructed game of treasure hunt.”—Tom Charity, *CNN*: “*Orphanage* will give you the creeps,” January 3, 2008.

“This is a movie whose power and emotional pitch lie in the understated: the discreet performances, the lack of special effects, the laconic script.”—Maria Delgado, *Sight and Sound*: “The young and the damned,” April 2008, pages 44–45.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Belén Rueda (Laura); Fernando Cayo (Carlos); Roger Princep (Simon); Mabel Rivera (Pilar); Montserrat Carulla (Benigna); Andrés Gertrúdx (Enrique); Edgar Vivar (Professor Balaban); Óscar Casas (Tomas); Mireia Renau (Laura Nina); Georgina Avellaneda (Rita); Carlo Gordilla (Martin); Alejandro Camps (Victor); Carmen López (Alicia); Óscar Lara (Guillermo); Geraldine Chaplin (Aurora).

CREW: Picturehouse, Esta Vivo!, Grupo Rodar, Telecinco Cinéma, Warner Bros. and Wild Bunch present *The Orphanage*. Casting: Gelt Albaladejo. Production Designer: Joseph Rosell. Costume Designer: Maria Reyes. Special Effects: Efe-X. Music: Fernando Velazquez. Director of Photography: Oscar Faura. Producers: Alvaro Augustin, Joaquin Padro, Mar Targarona. Executive Producer: Guillermo Del Toro. Written by: Sergio G.

SYNOPSIS: Laura (Rueda) is a 37-year-old woman who spent her childhood years in the Good Shepherd Orphanage with five friends, at least until she was adopted and given a new home elsewhere. Now, as an adult, Laura and her husband, a doctor named Carlos, have moved back to the abandoned Orphanage with their adopted son, Simon (Pricep). Simon is HIV positive, and as an only child he is lonely and bored, at least until he is befriended by five, perhaps six, imaginary playmates. One of them, Tomas, is deformed. On a day when Laura is hosting a gathering for special needs children, Simon learns of his nature as an adopted child; and that he is sick, in danger of dying young. Angry, he feels betrayed; that his parents have lied to him. Laura argues with him, and eventually slaps him across the face. Without a trace, without a clue, Simon vanishes. Six agonizing months pass. Then nine. An increasingly desperate Laura comes to believe with all her heart that Simon's ghostly imaginary friends have taken the boy somewhere, and that they will release him if only she plays a game with them. Laura recruits a psychic named Aurora (Chapman) for a "summoning" in her house, but there is no sign of Simon. Later, Aurora asks Laura "how far" she is willing to go to see her son again. Alone in the orphanage (her husband having all but abandoned her...), Laura goes about staging the facility as it looked when she was a child, when Simon's friends were not ghosts, but living, breathing children. She does this in hopes that the six ghosts will relent and help her locate her son. A scavenger/treasure hunt leads Laura to a secret chamber in the basement, and a final, heart-rending reckoning about what actually happened to Simon.

COMMENTARY: This Spanish terror outing is one of the most elegant, involving, disturbing, and heart-breaking horror films of the 2000s. And one of the absolute best. Perhaps it is because the movie senses the fragility of mortality, especially a child's mortality viewed from a parent's perspective. The makers of *The Orphanage* seem to understand how one tiny second of parental selfishness, one instant with attention directed elsewhere, can lead to absolute, irrevocable disaster in the life of a child.

Or of a parent.

It is possible to interpret *The Orphanage* in a few ways. For instance, one could gaze at the film as a committed rationalist might and conclude, not inappropriately, that there are no supernatural bells and whistles involved at all. Laura's feelings of guilt are entirely responsible for the ghosts that often "appear." Remember, according to the film's dialogue, "*it is in the subconscious that the living co-exist with the dead.*"

Accordingly, virtually everything that occurs in *The Orphanage* is readily explainable in terms of consensus, natural reality. From the plaintive banging noises Laura hears inside the walls to Simon's discovery of his illness because of a hidden medical file in a kitchen drawer, there is not necessarily anything to suggest ghosts or spooks. Even a critical scene involving an "imaginary friend" at a beach-side cave is filmed ambiguously enough that the open-minded, analytical viewer might conclude no spirit was ever actually there (the footprints in the sand could belong to Simon himself). Thus, Laura's state of mind is always in question. At a bereavement group, for instance, she reports that Simon's imaginary friends are haunting the house, and every mourning parent in that support group has a similar story to offer; of seeing dead loved ones. Are they all seeing ghosts? No. It's the subconscious mind's way of coping with the unacceptable, with the unthinkable. Or so we may believe.

On the other hand, as *The Orphanage* trenchantly points out, "*seeing is not believing ... it's the other way around.*" Believing is seeing. So, it is entirely possible and indeed much more to fun to take the spectral occurrences at face value; to believe that the Good Shepherd Orphanage is haunted by the spirits of the children who died there under tragic circumstances (a drowning, and a poisoning, respectively). That because of his illness, Simon boasts a special sensitivity to the nearby ghosts. They talk to him. They want to play with him.

In whatever way the viewer ultimately chooses to view *The Orphanage*, it is a splendidly realized. A

sequence involving the sing-song recitation of a childhood rhyme (“one, two, three ... knock on the wall”) starts quietly and then escalates through repetition and a sense of anticipation into nothing less than full-throated terror. No special effects are deployed in the scene, merely the clever, effective use of a simple, repeated camera move: an unsteady pan across what by rights should be an empty room ... but isn't.

Another chilling set-piece involves night-vision photography, static-y electronic monitors and the creepy old medium, Aurora, traversing the dark house in an attempt to locate “the ghosts.” Again, simple but effective film technique is deployed to elevate suspense. During a psychic regression, there's a slow, methodical countdown from ten to one. With each additional number recitation, the camera provides another slow zoom into the face of a concerned, freaked bystander. Then, as Aurora patrols the premises, the sounds of spirits are captured by technology, in the form of sinewaves, in close-up. The jarring peaks and valleys of terror practically scream at the audience. The approach is spare, minimal and absolutely riveting. Bayona's camera itself seems perpetually unsettled, prowling uneasily about corridors and landscapes. The presence of the unseen is suggested ... yet just out of reach. *Like Simon himself.*

Thematically, *The Orphanage* alludes frequently to *Peter Pan*, that childhood paean to “never growing up.” Only here, Never-Land is Death. The children never grow up, because they die. Watch for an early discussion of the character of Wendy, and the fact that she never returned to Never Land with Peter but grew old instead; and that Laura considers herself similarly “too old” for Never Land. In the course of the film, the ghostly children, and Simon himself teach Laura how to play again; how to understand the particular “powers” (of imagination) that we associate most closely with the young, the innocent. When the Wendy/*Peter Pan* allusion pops up again in the stirring climax, it's an emotional apex, and the viewer will realize just how carefully, how thoughtfully crafted this movie remains. Credit not just Bayona, but writer Sergio G. Sanchez. Together they've gifted horror fans a legitimate classic.

One may also catch deliberate resonances here of *Poltergeist* (the missing child) or Henry James' *Turn of the Screw* (particularly Clayton's 1961 adaptation, *The Innocents*) in *The Orphanage*. Yet this movie boasts a poignant core, a sense of the human heart that, in some fashion, pushes it beyond any simple assembly of its notable influences, at least in terms of emotional impact. When all is finally revealed in the “little house” of Tomas, when Laura must face the truth about what really happened to her son, the audience will weep.

I know I did.

*Otis (DTV) * * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Bostin Christopher (Otis Broth); Ashley Johnson (Riley Lawson); Tracey Scoggins (Rita Vitale); Illeana Douglas (Kate Lawson); Daniel Stern (Will Lawson); Gary Kraus (Mr. Warner); Kristen Trucksess (Mrs. Warner); Kevin Pollak (Elmo Broth); Jere Burns (Agent Hotchkiss); Jared Krusnitz (Reed Lawson); Tarah Paige (Kim); Ashley Greene (Kim #4); Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs (Orderly).

CREW: Raw Feed and Warner Home Video present *Otis*. Casting: John Jackson. Costume Designer: Danielle Launzel. Production Designer: Frank Bollinger. Music: James S. Levine. Director of Photography: Thomas Yatsko. Film Editor: Alex Marquez. Producers: Steve Ecclesine, Tony Krantz, John Shibban. Written by: Erik Jendresen, Thomas Schnauz. Directed by: Tony Krantz. M.P.A.A. Rating: NR. Running time: 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A simpleton and serial killer, Otis (Christopher), abducts and murders teen girls who remind him of the girl that rejected him in high school, Kim. His latest abductee is teenager Riley Lawson (Johnson), who refuses to play along with him or his twisted games. Hoping to find their missing daughter, Riley's parents and brother evade the efforts of the egotistical police detective helping

them and set out to capture the serial killer. Unfortunately, they kill the wrong man, creating a whole new set of problems.

COMMENTARY: The 2010s gave the culture a new word: incel. The term, coined by those it applies to, refers to a man who is involuntarily celibate. Broadly-speaking, an incel is a man who feels that he is entitled to have sex with beautiful women even though he may be undesirable physically, socially and emotionally. He feels entitled, because of his status (white, male, American), to women's bodies. Otis, the lead character in the film named after him, is pretty clearly an early incel. He abducts young women and attempts to relive the experience he didn't get to have with the original Kim, a "*magical prom night*."

Overweight, and unattractive inside and out, Otis is a pitiable figure. After his re-creation of his prom night he tries to get frisky and prematurely ejaculates, another representation of his awkwardness and unsuitability as a partner. But the film doesn't treat Otis entirely with contempt. Contrarily, he is seen to be a bullied figure himself. Otis is unloved and has been treated as "*a fucking animal*," and so that's how he treats the women he abducts, whom he thinks owe him love and respect. So, while the film portrays Otis as a terrible person, it is not without empathy for him, either. The movie attempts to explain Otis's background and history, so that his poor behavior, while never excused, is seen as part of a larger problem.

Seen on the television at one point in *Otis* is the classic silent horror film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. A familiar rhetorical technique in horror films is to feature older horror films on televisions in frame. Audiences are then asked to compare and contrast or juxtapose the film they are watching with the film the characters are watching. In this case, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) is about a madman who attempts to bend the will of other people to his own; to make them murder for him. *Otis* plays against this idea by featuring a man, Otis, who can't sway his captives to his way of thinking. He has no power to persuade and must rely on abduction and force with the women he desires.

But there is another reading involving *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, as well that ties into the film's other plot line. Outside of Otis and Riley, the film follows Riley's dysfunctional family, as it tries to find her, get her back, and punish her abductor. The police, representing legal authority, aren't much help on any of these fronts. The family takes matters into its own hands, and takes glee in torturing Otis's brother, Elmo, whom they believe to be the abductor. Their beliefs, and the lack of a credible authority in their lives lead the family to commit terrible crimes. In *Cabinet*, Caligari uses a sleepwalker to kill for him, but Riley's family convinces itself to kill, based on inaccurate information and beliefs. The convincing is all internal, based on flawed information and living, essentially in a bubble of info that reason can't penetrate.

This is a cultural message in several ways.

First, the action in *Otis* is a metaphor for the Iraq War, a pre-emptive war sold to the American people by the Bush Administration. Consider: Both Otis and Elmo are bad men. But Elmo did not do anything to Riley, or her family. Yet the family goes after Elmo and kills him. They do so gleefully, using torture (or is that enhanced interrogation techniques?) and at one point, Mom (Douglas) even quips "*I'm the decider*," in a deliberate echo of President Bush's famous words. Again, substitute Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda for Otis, and Saddam Hussein and Iraq for Elmo. Then substitute Riley's family for America and the Bush Administration, and the comparison is complete. Saddam didn't attack America, despite the fact that he was a bad man. Yet he was the one who paid for Bin Laden's crimes. Elmo didn't attack Riley, but he is the individual whom the family goes to war against.

Another text in the film that is used for juxtaposition is William Golding's 1954 novel, *Lord of the Flies*. Riley's brother, Reed, reads that book in the film. The book involves a group of boys on an island who, stranded there, attempt to develop a civilization or government. It goes badly, however, and descends into chaos, savagery, and death. For comparison, *Otis* involves a family that decides to take the law into its own hands and makes the same descent into immorality.

The film also suggests not coincidentally, that this is precisely what happened to America in Bush's hands. The detainment without trial of "enemy combatants," the authorization of torture against

suspected terrorists and a pre-emptive war against a country that didn't even attack the United States of America are all aspects of a new national barbarism or savagery, a descent from the values it had held dear. The dismissal of the Geneva Conventions in the War on Terror was just one more aspect of the lawlessness and immorality of this campaign of revenge. Riley's family and America, deeply wronged by the savage and monstrous crimes they were victims of (abduction and terrorist attack on 9/11) struck out wildly for revenge and retribution, without considering where that revenge and retribution should be aimed.

The comparison to America in the War on Terror Age, and the goings on here are cemented, perhaps, by the frequency of images of American flags and American bumper stickers. The iconography of Old Glory is pervasive enough, along with lines like Mom's, quoting G.W. Bush, that the connection between the film's narrative and America's story are plain.

Otis doesn't earn a higher star rating for a few reasons. First, many of the performances are uncalibrated, or miss the mark. The police detective, for instance, is played in such a campy, theatrical way that every scene involving him diminishes the film's sense of reality, or verisimilitude. Riley's family is not much better calibrated in terms of performances. The actors all seemed to have been encouraged to go way over the top. It's as if they are hyper aware of the political leanings/message of the material, and just lean way into it, instead of maintaining the reality of Otis's world, and allowing viewers to draw conclusions for themselves about the left-wing messages about the War on Terror and Bush.

Depending on leanings, the message may be considered worthwhile or wrong, fair or unfair, partisan or even-handed, but the fact of the matter is that it becomes the discussion, not the subtext. Otis is, therefore, often obvious and two-dimensional in presentation. That over-the-top, campy approach conflicts with the cerebral nature of comparisons to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or *Lord of the Flies*. It's a clear-cut case of political leanings overtaking the literal nature of a narrative to the entire enterprise's deficit. This author agrees with the message and sees the comparison between Riley's family and America in the War on Terror as a smart one that tracks. But it should be something that isn't spoon-fed to audiences.

By treading into outright political messaging, *Otis* loses sight of its titular character, and what could have been an exploration of how men like him feel entitled to control women or use women to heal their own deficits. This "Men Behaving Badly" horror movie about a pitiable incel instead becomes an anti-Bush polemic. Accordingly, one's mileage may vary regarding its success as a work of art.

Prom Night * 1/2

Critical Reception

"This movie will keep you on the edge of your seats the entire time, with a new scene full of blood and gore every 10 minutes. It's predictable at times, but quite entertaining. If you liked *Disturbia*, you will enjoy *Prom Night*."—Elizabeth Brennan, *Home News Tribune*, April 21, 2008.

"Expect every cheap shock in the book, though you won't actually be scared. It looks slick, and Snow does her best with a predictable script, but it's disappointingly dull and bloodless."—Roz Laws, "Teacher's a killjoy; *Prom Night*," January 8, 2008, page 11.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Brittany Snow (Donna Keppel); Scott Porter (Bobby); Jessica Stroup (Claire); Dana Davis (Lisa Hines); Collins Pennie (Ronnie Heflin); Kelly Blatz (Michael); James Ransone (Detective Nash); Brianne Davis (Crissy Lyn); Kellan Lutz (Rick Leland); Mary Mara (Ms. Waters); Ming Wen (Dr. Elisha Crowe); Jonathon Schaech (Richard Fenton); Idris Elba (Detective Winn); Jessalyn Gilsig (Aunt Karen); Linden Ashby (Uncle Jack); Jana Kramer (April); Rachel Specter (Taylor); Valeri Ross (Mrs. Hines); Lori Heuring (Mrs. Keppel); Jay Phillips (DJ).

CREW: Screen Gems, Original Film, Newmarket Films and Alliance Films presents *Prom Night*. Casting:

Lindsey Hayes Kroeger, David Rapaport, Production Designer: Jon Gary Steele. Costume Designer: Lyn Paolo. Special Effects: Jason Dodd, Zoic Studios, Lola Visual Effects. Music: Paul Haslinger. Director of Photography: Checco Varese. Film Editing: Jason Ballantine. Producers: Toby Jaffe, Neal H. Moritz. Executive Producers: J.S. Cardone, Marc Forby, Glenn S. Gainor, Bruce Mellon, William Tyrer. Written by: J.S. Cardone. Directed by: Nelson McCormick. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Three years ago, an obsessed high school teacher, Mr. Fenton (Schaech), stalked a student, Donna (Snow), and murdered her entire family. Since that traumatic event, Brittany has been in therapy with Dr. Crowe (Wen) and trying to get her life back together. As prom night nears, however, Fenton escapes from incarceration at an insane asylum, and makes his way to the hotel where the event is being held. He begins to murder Donna's unsuspecting friends, as he zeroes on her, his real quarry.

COMMENTARY: The late 2000s brings audiences yet another poor remake of a well-regarded 1980s slasher film, *Prom Night*. Like many other remakes of the era, this is a remake of the 1980 film in name-only. The story is entirely different this time around, save for the setting of the prom, and the film even ventures away from its slasher film origins to present a far more conventional, and unsurprising tale.

In the original *Prom Night*, there was a mystery killer, who donned a mask, and whose identity was a secret until the finale on the glittering disco floor. The concept of the masked killer is often crucial to the slasher movie paradigm, and the reveal of his or her identity (along with the reveal of the crime in the past that made him or her go crazy) is a key element of that format. The new *Prom Night* goes in a different direction, and apparently seeks to be a thriller, rather than slasher film. It features a killer, played by Jonathan Schaech, whose identity is known all throughout the film, and who does not wear a mask or otherwise cloak his identity, except to skulk around in a ballcap. The thriller aspect of the material is also played up via the presence of Idris Elba as a police detective attempting to catch the killer at the hotel. Accordingly, the new *Prom Night* is less pure "horror" than its predecessor, and more a police procedural/serial killer type film. One on hand, fans may appreciate that the film tried something new or went in a different direction. On the other hand, the film isn't really a remake, or what horror fans were likely seeking.

A very by-the-numbers film, featuring mostly insipid young characters who rattle on endlessly about how prom night is the most important night of their lives, this *Prom Night* remake may be most notable for the way it reflects late 2000s American culture. A key issue in the film is Donna's PTSD, and again, the 2000s was the decade that brought this psychological issue to light in a dramatic way, especially since many Americans of the decade died in war, in terrorist attacks, and in natural disasters. The corollary to the PTSD decade, perhaps, is common prescription medicine usage. A key exchange in the film sees Donna noting to her therapist she won't take her regular medicine, Klonopin, on prom night, because she doesn't "*want to be numb tonight.*"

The casual handling of both Donna's trauma and psychiatric drug use suggests a culture in which people are suffering, and numbing themselves so they don't feel the pain, or contend with that suffering in a meaningful way. At the same time the film features these elements of the American 2000s, it also depicts a prom night that is obscene in its first world extravagance. The prom is set at a four-star hotel, the Pacific Grand Hotel, where every student has their own room. The students arrive in limousines like they are walking the red carpet at the Oscars. Is this, one wonders, a good use of school resources, especially when so many Americans live in poverty? The film's approach to authority also mirrors how people were feeling at the end of the Bush Era, as the economy collapsed. Figures of authority here are seen as either deranged (the killer is a schoolteacher), or ineffective (Elba's well-meaning detective).

To be clear, *Prom Night* doesn't actually concern any of these issues, or grapple with them in a meaningful or even tangential way. The film wordlessly accepts the luxurious lifestyle of the students, as well as the common prescription drug usage, as part of the landscape, and so the film is merely a snapshot or reflection of the culture at the time. Perhaps if the film had contended with these things, it

would have emerged as a timely and intriguing remake. Instead, it's just a forgettable, watered-down slasher remake that doesn't paint a pretty picture of the culture near the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

Quarantine * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"*Quarantine* slams through its shocks and, helped by an oppressive, sirens-heavy audio track, sustains its suspense before sensibly wrapping, at just under 90 minutes."—Rob Lowing, *Sun Herald*, November 30, 2008, page 17.

"There aren't that many scares in *Quarantine*, but there is a mood of anxiety, which is underlined with the washed-out, news-camera-style footage. Combine that with the fact that the electricity has been turned off in the building and you have a dark film whose jumbled action sequences (our old friend, the jiggly camera, is at it again) mean we get fleeting glimpses of the unfolding terrors."—Jay Stone, *Calgary Herald*: "Viral marketing with an actual virus," October 11, 2008, page C6.

"For anybody who's caught the original, *Quarantine*'s going to cause a severe attack of the déjà views. No wonder they got it out so quickly: minus a few tweaks, it's shot-for-shot, jump-for-jump identical. Even the apartment block's been replicated with OCD precision. We're talking Van Sant's *Psycho*-precise. It shows the strength of the source that *Quarantine* is still a clammy, fingernail-scraping experience, strong on sound design which, with its constant background of sirens and choppers, builds a palpable post-9/11 panic. The concept of shady authorities barricading the public in to face a government-made threat fits the national mood and justifies the relocation, but honestly.... It's so slavish you sense John Erick Dowdle isn't so much directing as handing in somebody else's homework."—Simon Crook, *Empire*, October 23, 2008.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jennifer Carpenter (Angela); Jay Hernandez (Jake); Steve Harris (Scott Percival); Johnathon Schaech (George Fletcher); Columbus Short (Danny); Andrew Fiscella (James McCreedy); Rade Shebedgia (Yuri Ivanov); Greg Gemann (Lawrence); Bernard White (Bernard); Dania Ramirez (Sadie); Elaine Kagan (Wanda); Marin Hinkle (Kathy).

CREW: Sony Pictures, Screen Gems, and Filmax Entertainment present *Quarantine*. Casting: Lindsey Hayes Kroeger, David H. Rapaport. Costume Designer: Maya Lieberman. Production Designer: Jon Gay Steele. Director of Photography: Ken Seng. Film Editor: Elliot Greenberg. Producers: Serio Aguero, Doug Davison, Roy Lee. Executive Producers: Calos Fernandez, Julio Fernandez, Glenn S. Gainor. Based on the motion picture *REC* by: Paco Plaza, Luiso Berdejo, Jaume Balaguero. Written by: John Erick Dowdle and Drew Dowdle. Directed by: John Erick Dowdle. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Angela (Carpenter), working for "The Night Shift," a series on L.A.'s nighttime world, follows a local fire department. Soon, however a call comes in about a disturbance at a local apartment building. Angela and the firemen go in and are confronted with a horrific reality. The apartment denizens are stricken by some kind of plague that mimics the symptoms of rabies and is passed person-to-person by blood and saliva. The infected zombie-like beings overrun the apartment, trapping the Angela and the surviving fire fighters inside. Soon, the government quarantines the building because of a "biological" or nuclear threat. As those inside seek to survive and escape infection, they begin to realize the source of the terror lurks in the apartment's attic.

COMMENTARY: *REC* is one of the ten greatest horror films of the 2000s, no contest. The American remake, *Quarantine*, isn't bad.

That's about the highest compliment that can be paid to a film that slavishly, and without inspiration, retells the same story with the same found footage techniques, in the same ways. There's a good, horror-friendly cast here, led by *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*'s Jennifer Carpenter and *Hostel*'s Jay Hernandez, but even they can't add much fresh or original to the warmed-over material. This remake reminded me a great deal of *Omen 666*. That film was also cast well, and it too couldn't find any real fresh ground to mine in a story that had been told better the first time around. The remake syndrome, or quandary strikes again! The question a remake always raises is: Why remake something artistically and economically successful in the first place, if there is no other reason to undertake a remake, such as improvements in technology, or a fresh way of viewing the original material. *Quarantine* can't answer that question in a meaningful way.

Quarantine sets *REC*'s action in America, and is lensed in English, so it seems tailor-made for mainstream U.S. audiences who don't want to go to the trouble of reading subtitles. In the 2000s, that reasoning feels more like filmmakers pandering, since audiences had already embraced films such as *High Tension*, *Irreversible*, or the original *The Grudge*, all shot in non-English languages. It seems like a poor choice to remake *REC* solely for the benefit of making it more accessible. Why not save money and just dub the original instead?

Again, this is one of those movies that makes reviewing films difficult. *Quarantine* is a perfectly serviceable film, unlike a remake such as *The Fog* (2005), which is legitimately terrible. But *Quarantine* is not bad. It is just slavish to the point of absurdity. If one feels like going the long way around to avoid subtitles, then this movie might reasonably replace *REC*. But other than for that one reason, the brilliant *REC* is recommended instead.

*Rest Stop: Don't Look Back (DTV) **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Richard Tillman (Tom Hilt); Jessie Ward (Marilyn); Graham Norris (Jared); Joseph George Mendicino (Jesse); Julie Mond (Nicole); Brionne Davis (Driver); Diane Louise Salinger (The Mother); Michael Childers (The Father); Gary Entin (Twin #1); Edmund Entin (Twin #2); Mikey Post (Scotty); Steve Railsback (The Owner); Michael Toland (Mr. Hilt); Kelly Albanese, Sharon Senina (Party Girls).

CREW: Warner Home Video, Flame Ventures, and Raw Feed Present *Rest Stop: Don't Look Back*. Casting: Patrick Baca, Robin Nassif. Production Designer: Frank Bollinger. Costume Designer: Danielle Launzel. Special Effects: Comen VFX. Music: Bear McCreary. Director of Photography: Jas Shelton. Film Editor: Richard Byard. Producers: Steve Ecclesine, Tony Krantz, Daniel Myrick, John Shibana. Written by: John Shibana. Directed by: Shawn Papazian. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An Iraq War vet, Tom (Richard), returns home to search for his brother Jesse, who has been missing for a year. Along with his girlfriend Marilyn (Ward) and Nicole's friend, Jared (Norris), Tom attempts to retrace the steps of the missing couple. After a stop at a gas station, and a journey to the Old Highway, the trio is attacked by the malevolent pick-up truck driver. They reach the haunted rest stop and encounter the ghost of Nicole (Mond) as well as the RV riding spirits.

COMMENTARY: At one point during the mayhem in this sequel to *Rest Stop*, a character notes that "*this whole thing is completely fucking crazy.*"

Good point. And it's good description of the movie.

This is a gonzo, bizarre, incomprehensible film that returns to the site of the original massacre, an out-of-the-way rest stop in California, but somehow manages to add very little to the franchise overall.

That last line may not be entirely fair. The film opens with a prologue to all the terror, in 1971 in

attempt to offer some explanation for the action. This sequence introduces the strange RV family and depicts how the religious zealot patriarch murdered the pick-up truck driver for having sex with the Mother. The movie also introduces the legend that if you're buried without eyeballs, you are cursed to wander the Earth in pain, forever.

Of course, if you do have eyeballs, you will be cursed to watch this movie, and suffer a comparable pain.

But other than introducing the ice pop twins, the fundamentalist Mom and Dad, and bringing bug-eyed Steve Railsback into the mix as an attendant at a "last chance" gas station, this direct-to-video sequel simply repeats the same premise as the original film. Unlucky travelers find the (haunted?) rest stop and are tormented by the driver, the ghosts of former victims (some of whom have had tongues chopped out...), and the Winnebago family. As before, the film wallows in some overtly disgusting moments. Jared, at one point, gets covered in feces from a demolished port-a-potty, and that is a sight not easily forgotten.

Once more, however, clarity is not the strong suit of this particular enterprise. The whole origin story of the terror seems to go as follows. An unlucky traveler, the pick-up driver, got murdered by the RV family in the early seventies. The family then buried him without his eyes, and he came back from the dead, and murdered the family. He cut out their eyes too, and now they are back as wandering spirits too. So, the truckers are enemies, yet seem to work in tandem to haunt or torture the living, much like the memory of watching this sequel.

Meanwhile, anyone unlucky enough to stop at the rest stop gets pulled into the haunting and are trapped there as ghosts. Maybe. It is unknown whether their eyes have been cut out or not.

Rest Stop 2's only other wrinkle worth mentioning is that the lead character is a veteran, referred to as Captain Shock and Awe, and that there is some loose attempt to tie the Iraq War to the gory action. The film features many shots of an American flag fluttering in the breeze, and one of the film's final shots reveals the American flag torn and tattered. Perhaps the filmmakers were attempting to note that America will be haunted by the Iraq War for a long time, much as the rest stop haunts unwary travelers?

One thing is for certain: this sequel will haunt the annals of bad horror sequels for years to come.

Rogue (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Radha Mitchell (Kate Ryan); Michael Vartan (Pete McKell); Sam Worthington (Neil Kelly); Caroline Brazier (Mary Ellen); Stephen Curry (Simon) Celia Ireland (Gwen); John Jarratt (Russell); Heather Mitchell (Elizabeth); Geoff Morrell (Allen); Damien Richardson (Collin); Robert Taylor (Everett); Mia Wasikowska (Sherry); Barry Otto (Merv); Shaun Longham (Barfly); Patch (Kevin).

CREW: Genius Productions, Dimension Films, Emu Creek Pictures and Village Roadshow Pictures presents *Rogue*. Casting: Angela Heesom, Venus Kanani, May Vernieu. Costume Design: Nicola Dunn. Production Designer: Robert Webb. Music: Francois Tataz. Special Effects: Fuel International, John Cox's Ceratue Workshop, Connelly Make-up FX Team, Weta Workshop. Director of Photography: Will Gibson. Film Editor: Jason Ballantine. Producers: Matt Hearn, David Lightfoot, Greg McLean. Executive Producers: Robert Kirby, Joel Pearlman, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. Written and Directed by: Greg McLean. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 99 minutes

SYNOPSIS: Pete McKell (Vartan) arrives at a scenic river in Australia and boards *The Suzanne*, the small river boat belonging to tour guide Kate Ryan (Mitchell). Along with other tourists, they go out on the water. The river tour goes smoothly until, on the way back to land, one of the tourists spies a flare in the distance. Kate is duty-bound to respond to any call for help on the river and navigates her small ship

down the river, into “sacred land.” While investigating a capsized boat in a small inlet, *The Suzanne* is violently struck by a territorial crocodile and irreparably damaged. Kate and the tourists quickly evacuate to a small slice of land in the middle of the river, while the crocodile circles and hunts. Unfortunately, as one of the tourists points out, this tiny sanctuary is a *tidal* river, meaning that by nightfall, the entire island will be submerged. The tourists now have a choice: wait until dark and swim to land when they can’t see anything. Or try to get to land *now*, with the crocodile nearby.

COMMENTARY: How fast can you swim?

If you’re trapped in a tidal river with a hungry salt-water crocodile—a veritable “*living dinosaur*”—you better pray that you can swim really, *really* fast.

According to Greg McLean’s horror movie, *Rogue*, these ancient animals can swim underwater at twenty miles-per-hour without leaving even a single ripple on the surface. Worse, these two-ton predators have perfected the art of the hunt after “200 million years” of practice and so they’ll watch and wait patiently learning your routine. So, if you don’t vary those routines, you’re gone in a single gulp; swallowed down the gullet of a 20–25-foot, prehistoric dragon.

These alarming statistics are likely enough to make phagophobics nervous. And for the rest of the audience, director McLean also delivers the goods; nudging his finely-crafted cinematic ship into the chaotic terrain of terror; conjuring a tense, incredibly suspenseful “*when animal attacks*” movie.

McLean, who directed the impressive, disturbing *Wolf Creek* (2005), is the writer, producer and director of this genre effort, one set entirely outdoors in the remote Australian Outback.

Learning a valuable, timeless lesson from Steven Spielberg and *Jaws*, McLean never reveals much of the crocodile until the shocking climax, set in the crocodile’s underground lair. Instead, he shows us other crocs in action; provides scads of facts about these salt-water monsters and reveals their nasty handiwork. By the time McLean reveals his impressive monster, we’re already hooked, and terrified. The sequence in which Vartan attempts to slip by the sleeping juggernaut, one agonizing step at a time is a modern masterpiece in provoking anxiety.

McLean also succeeds due to a skill he clearly developed on *Wolf Creek*. He understands how to fashion a striking sense of place on film. *Rogue*’s Northern Territory landscape and waterscape is an important character in the film, and accordingly we get beautiful views of natural vistas and local wildlife. The swooping aerial shots and other impressive nature shots serve a critical purpose beyond the picturesque: they establish the isolation of the trapped tourists. As we plainly see, even if our protagonists could get off the tiny island to shore, they’d still be surrounded by forest. And surrounding the forest are high mountain peaks. And beyond those canyon peaks are miles of desert. Seeing this rough, inhospitable terrain, we begin to comprehend why only ancient, hardened crocodiles call this prehistoric world home. The battlefield is a treacherous one.

If you want to see that battle, man against “*a fuckin steam train with teeth*,” *Rogue* is the exhilarating horror movie for you.

The Ruins ★ ★ ★ 1½

Critical Reception

“Computer-generated visual effects bring the voracious man-eating vines to life in a series of bravura set pieces, including stomach-churning scenes of tendrils crawling beneath the skin of one character. If you’re squeamish, you’ll be covering your eyes too when Jeff is forced to perform a DIY amputation to prevent one hapless soul dying from infection.”—*Sunday Sun*, June 22, 2008, page 52.

“What could have been a compelling adventure-thriller turned out to be an aimless trek through the jungle. Although the special effects crew is worthy of acknowledgement and commendation, it would take a lot of

Miracle-Grow to save this lifeless film.”—Emily Hoover, *Daytona Beach News—The Journal*: “Movie Date *The Ruins* is aimless trek through the Jungle,” April 10, 2008, page G10.

“The actors do a fine job with what little they’re given, but they can only do so much. On the technical side, the special effects are squirm-inducing, the scenery is beautiful, and the photography is very nice.”—Jared Counts, *Houston Public Media*, August 22, 2008.

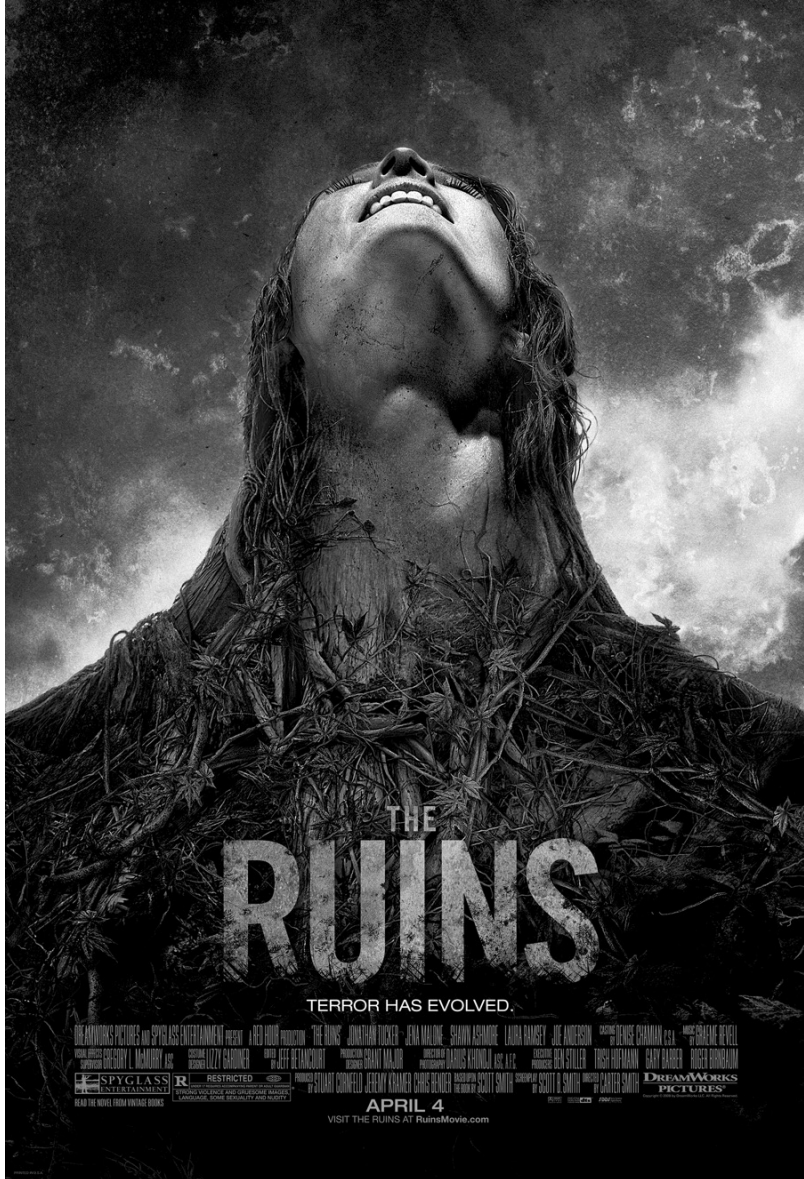
Cast & Crew

CAST: Jonathan Tucker (Jeff); Jena Malone (Amy); Laura Ramsey (Stacy); Shawn Ashmore (Eric); Joe Anderson (Mathias); Serio Calderon (Lead Mayan); Jesse Ramirez (Mayan Bowman); Balder Moreno (Mayan Horseman); Dimitri Aveas (Dimitri); Patricio Almeida Rodrique (Taxi Driver); Maria Jurado (Mayan Archer); Luis Ramos (Mayan Rifelman).

CREW: Casting: Denise Chamian, Ben Parkinson. Production Designer: Grant Major. Costume Designer: Lizzy Gardiner. Special Effects: Rising Sun Pictures, Jason Baird, Patrick Tatopoulos. Music: Graeme Revell. Director of Photography: Darius Khondji. Film Editing: Jeff Betancourt. Producers: Chris Bender, Stuart Cornfield, Jeremy Kramer. Executive Producers: Gary Barber, Roger Birnbaum, Ben Stiller. Based on the novel of the same name by: Scott B. Smith. Written by: Scott B. Smith. Directed by: Carter Smith. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Four American college students on vacation in Mexico—Jeff (Tucker); Amy (Malone); Stacy (Ramsey) and Eric (Ashmore)—join a German, Mathias (Anderson), to explore ancient Mayan ruins at the end of a remote, eleven-mile road. Once at the site, the tourists are surrounded, on the ground, by locals, who won’t let them leave the temple ruins. As the group soon finds out, the temple is home to an insidious, and carnivorous form of vine. The ruthless, hungry vines begin to kill the Americans, even as the guardians on the perimeter refuse to help them or let them escape the premises.

COMMENTARY: The choking, encroaching terror of the low budget *The Ruins* (2008) is all about two relevant War on Terror Age issues: American narcissism and American xenophobia. These may even be two heads of the same fire-breathing dragon. Based on the gripping 2006 novel by Scott Smith, *The Ruins* concerns four robust American tourists in their early twenties who unwisely stray from the beaten path on a vacation to Mexico and end up as tasty fodder for malevolent, possibly sentient carnivorous vines in an out-of-the-way Mayan temple. They can’t escape this “wrong turn” locale because heavily-armed locals with itchy trigger fingers have staked out a camp below the ruins, salted the earth around the temple, and quarantined the strangers so the infected folks cannot carry the unstoppable weeds out of the jungle (where the murderous plants would, likely, take over the world in no time).



The above-noted narcissism, or self-involvement comes into play when the vapid American youngsters, well-played by Jonathan Tucker, Jena Malone, Shawn Ashmore and Laura Ramsey choose to stay atop the questionable sanctuary of the temple, rather than engage the locals based purely on their iron-clad belief that “*Four Americans on vacation don’t just disappear.*”

Haven't they seen *Hostel*?



Amy (Jena Malone) and Jeff (Jonathan Tucker) share a tender moment in *The Ruins* (2008).

But seriously, they expect technology like cell phones to save them in this far corner of the world,

simply because they are Americans. They expect rescuers either from the local hotel or airline to come for them in a scant day's time when the obvious though unpleasant answer to their dilemma and one vindicated in the film's remarkable climax is that one of the Americans must make a sacrifice for the common good; for the others to survive. This truth seems like a truly foreign concept to the indulged, entitled twenty-something characters of *The Ruins*, save for Tucker's doctor-in-training, Jeff.



Stacy (Laura Ramsey, left) and Amy (Jena Malone) are approached by something terrifying in *The Ruins* (2008).

Early on, for instance, when Amy (Malone) is asked to help the injured guide, a German hunk named Mathias (Joe Anderson), she blanches, showing little empathy for the injured man. She finally helps, but only grudgingly. Twelve hours earlier, she is practically begging the same man (Mathias) to bone her so she can live. The counterpoint to the American selfishness and narcissism is seen in the natives, who are prepared to shoot anyone, including one of their own, to keep the danger to the world, the plants, quarantined. They are not thinking exclusively of themselves. They do not believe they are an exception, or a carve out, because of where they happened to be born.

The xenophobia suffuses the film in terms of both narrative and location. This is one of those “Americans Abroad” horror films (like *Beyond Evil* [1980] or *The House Where Evil Dwells* [1982]), in which arrogant Westerners blunder into a frightening situation with no understanding of local customs or even the local language. True to this genre convention, “the foreigners” in *The Ruins* are depicted as physically ugly, particularly the brutal leader and of the “shoot first, ask questions later” variety. They can’t be negotiated with, and the leader even kills one of his own (a child) when there is the slightest danger of infection. The overt brutality, the lack of intelligent dialogue and the apparent lack of American morality (the murder of children) initially makes these characters seem more frightening and primitive than the entitled tech-savvy Americans. One of the facets most admirable about the film, however, is that—though undeniably brutal—these locals, as noted above actually serve a *higher* moral purpose; one beyond the sight of the callow tourists. They are *saving* their country and likely our country from the monstrous, spreading vines, but the “selfish” tourists, unable to see past their own miserable predicament, don’t see or understand the danger they could pose by carrying back the plants to other communities. And thus, we’ve come full circle: from narcissism to xenophobia and back to narcissism.

Shot for eight million dollars, which today constitutes an extremely low budget, *The Ruins* is a film that—like the monster weeds themselves—grows on the audience inch-by-inch. The first ten minutes are legitimately god awful as we’re introduced in clunky, over-familiar fashion to four interchangeable American students on holiday. They hang out at the pool, hang out on the beach, get drunk, fuck around, and for about ten minutes you might be forgiven for thinking you’re in a bad *Friday the 13th* movie; one where you actually want the teens to die because they’re so bloody unlikeable.

And yet, the longer the film goes on, the better it gets, and audiences will begin to sense the method behind the madness. The four American tourists (particularly Jeff) go through a fascinating (if dreadful) “awakening” in the film as they come to terms with where they are and what fate they are facing. That arc of discovery would be mitigated, especially Jeff’s heroic valediction, had the film not charted the relative superficiality of the characters to begin with. Once the film settles down at the Mayan pyramid, *The Ruins* begins to work its invidious, malicious magic. The film rarely leaves a single, suffocating location—the top of the pyramid—save for two or three absolutely harrowing sojourns into a very dark, vine encrusted chamber deep below the apex. There, the female characters haplessly go in search of what they believe is a ringing cell phone. What they actually find is nothing short of nightmarish. You may just crawl out of your skin, in particular, during one scene involving a vibrating flower and Amy’s approach to it.

An aura of claustrophobia and entrapment, one approximately as powerful as that featured in *The Descent* (2006) develops quickly following that spine-tingling moment, and before long one realizes that the characters are effectively surrounded and that their situation is entirely hopeless unless someone takes a bullet for the team.

Unexpectedly, if quite happily, *The Ruins* rapidly transforms itself from shallow teen slasher-wannabe into a seventies-style “savage” cinema-style film—one legitimately along the lines of the original *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977). It’s a film in which the characters must perform absolutely desperate, and horrifying, and extremely gory acts to survive. There is a double “amateur surgery” amputation sequence here, and it is one of the nastiest scenes in a horror film of this vintage. And if that doesn’t make audiences squirm in their seats, the moment is followed by a prolonged self-mutilation sequence involving a small, blunt hunting knife that will turn stomachs and set nerves jangling. Smith’s camera doesn’t flinch; doesn’t pull back, and doesn’t cut away during any of this horror and in a few

composition, particularly one involving Ramsey standing clueless in a pool of her own blood, one can almost sense the naughty, taboo-breaking vibe of an early Craven or early Hooper effort.

This review should really single out Ramsey here (though Tucker is quite good too.) Viewers start out the film thinking Ramsey is a mildly capable young actress, but Ramsey's progression from vapid youngster to tortured, insane, self-mutilating murderess is quite the accomplishment. Her performance as Stacy is thoroughly convincing without being artificial or histrionic, and again, one is reminded of *The Hills Have Eyes* and in particular, the under-appreciated Susan Lanier. Both women are underestimated by audiences, I think, because of their good looks and demeanor (dumb blonds?), but both deliver searing, raw performances in their respective horrors.

There are some missteps in *The Ruins*, no doubt. Critics were quick to pick up on them, and in general, I won't quibble with those assessments. For instance, if attacked by monstrous vines, why not burn the fuckers? We see the youngsters of *The Ruins* armed with torches for a while, but nothing comes of it.

Also, why not throw the legless, spinal-injury case a bone and move him away from the nearby man-eating bushes, since he can't do it by himself? Still, in the age of really bad horror remakes such as *When a Stranger Calls* and *The Hitcher*, beggars can't be choosers. With almost surgical precision, *The Ruins* proves itself an absolutely terrifying and involving film, one that deploys "jolt" scares, effective gore make-up, and suffocating claustrophobia to powerful effect. Most of all, the film ultimately states something positive about the American character. When the characters here realize what they are facing, they finally leave behind their well-honed sense of entitlement and narcissism, and act in a manner that is both heroic and moral. A sleeping giant has awakened, and I feel this is true for Americans of any generation. We like a life of leisure, but when forced to fight, we're damn well going to fight, even if it's no longer our first instinct. We may not view our "enemies" as fully human at first (xenophobia) and we may even be convinced that we are an exception to the world and the human race in terms of our mortality. But we get there, eventually.

Finally, I would deliberately compare the climax of *The Ruins* to *The Hills Have Eyes*, because it is about, like that seventies film, leaving behind everything you care about, everything you cherish, even human civilization and decorum, to survive, or to see that someone you love survives. In *The Hills Have Eyes*, the Carters must blow up their own trailer, a mobile sanctuary and symbol of society, to defeat cannibals in the desert. They had to marshal the corpse of the family matriarch—their Mom—as a decoy, even, to win the day.

In *The Ruins*, the blood of a dead friend likewise becomes a handy weapon in the Darwinian battle. And, in another bow to seventies savage cinema, *The Ruins* ends with Jena Malone making like an utterly mad Marilyn Burns in the denouement of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. *The Ruins* has good instincts to run with these resonant images and for that reason, it rises above some difficult-to-deny rough patches at the start. If in the end, *The Ruins* isn't quite a *Hostel* or a *Descent*, it is damned close.

Saw V ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Will you stop if I now say I appreciate life?"—Jay Stone, *Nanaimo Daily News*: "Saw V dreadful bloodbath," October 25, 2008, page C3.

"Gorehounds will be a little disappointed as the set-pieces involving Heath Robinson-inspired contraptions are fewer and further between as the script mixes the usual carnage and dubious morality with what is essentially a very obvious detective story."—Jams Croot, *Dominion Post*: "Saw-did Horror: How to ruin a great movie's legacy," October 30, 2017, page A11.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Tobin Bell (Jigsaw/John); Costas Mandylor (Mark Hoffman); Scott Patterson (Agent Strahm); Betsey Russell (Jill); Julie Benz (Brit); Meagan Good (Luba); Mark Rolston (Dan Erickson); Carlo Roata (Charles); Gregg Bryk (Mallick); Laura Gordon (Ashley); Joris Jarsky (Seth).

CREW: Lionsgate, Twisted Pictures and Mandate Pictures presents *Saw V*. Casting: Stephanie Gorin. Costume Designer: Alex Kavanagh. Production Designer: Tony Ianni. Music: Charlie Clouser. Director of Photography: David A. Armstrong. Film Editor: Kevin Greutert. Producers: Mark Burg, Gregg Hoffman, Oren Koules. Executive Producers: Troy Begnaud, Peter Block, Jason Constantine, Stacey Testro, James Wan, Leigh Whannell. Written by: Patrick Melton and Marcus Dunstant. Directed by: David Hackl. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Detective Hoffman (Mandylor) is honored for his work solving the Jigsaw Murders. However, another game is already afoot. Five individuals awake to find themselves "connected" and facing death if they can't overcome instinct and work together. Meanwhile, Agent Strahm of the FBI (Patterson) sets out to prove that Hoffman is actually Jigsaw's (Bell) second apprentice. Or perhaps his first....

COMMENTARY: The police announce in *Saw V* that "*The Jigsaw Murders are over.*" But they aren't, are they? The *Saw* movies just keep coming, one a year, through the end of the decade.

Battling the weight of predictability and diminishing creative returns, this fifth entry is, at the least, not an embarrassment or tarnishing of the franchise. First, the movie picks up the thread about Jeff's daughter, albeit briefly, so continuity is back on track! (I know, I'm a dork). Secondly, there seems to be a hook here on which to hang on all the sadism and torture.

That hook is, simply, the realization that we are "*all connected.*" Specifically, *Saw V* puts five individuals into a trap together. Survival of one, depends on everybody acting in a way not of their instinct but as a collective. This was absolutely a message for the times, as 2008 was the year of the Great Recession, and huge financial companies going bankrupt. Some executives, of course, had golden parachutes. Average Americans, in some cases, lost their life's savings. The executives walked away scot-free, millionaires or even billionaires.

Aren't we all connected?

The central game in *Saw V* reminds the contestant they are, in fact, joined. The "instinct" may be cut and run, every man or woman for himself, in a crisis like the Great Recession. But that is exactly the wrong approach. Instead, being mindful of connection, and working together, for the good of all, contra-instinct, seems to be the way to lift all boats equally. Not surprisingly, the five contestants in this game are tied to an illicit business plan, regarding real estate planning, the Department of City Planning, and so forth. All the individuals did their corrupt part. And now they must overcome that individual corruption and work together if they want to live. "*We're supposed to work together,*" one contestant

declares.

This critique of business, in the worst American recession since the 1930s is not a bad hook for a *Saw* movie, and indeed, *Saw V* and *Saw VI* (which concerns the immorality of for-profit healthcare) are more topical than the early entries in this franchise. They have looked to the larger culture for something to comment on, and that fact makes them relevant, if not, necessarily easier to watch.

Again, this author isn't sold on the Hoffman character or Mandylor's portrayal, but one feels watching this film that the *Saw* filmmakers have moved past their first paradigm and apprehension about their material to find a direction moving forward. At least for a little while.

Seventh Moon (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Amy Smart (Mel); Tim Chiou (Yul); Dennis Chan (Ping).

CREW: Haxan Films and Ghosthouse Underground present *Seventh Moon*. Casting: Paul Palo, Linda Phillips-Palo. Production Designer: Yuet-nam Lau. Costume Designers: William Fung, Anna Roth. Special Effects: Click 3X, Spectral Motion. Music: Tony Cora, Kent Sparling. Director of Photography: Wah-Chuen Lam. Producers: Matt Compton, Robin Cowie, Gregg Hale. Executive Producer: Bob Eick. Story by: Jamie Nash and Eduardo Sanchez. Written and Directed by: Eduardo Sanchez. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Young newlyweds Yul (Chiou) and Melissa (Smart) honeymoon in China. After a busy day at a street festival, the couple's local tour guide drives the exhausted and inebriated newlyweds to meet Yul's family. They fall asleep during the ride, however, and when they awaken en route, learn that they are lost and that the roads in this rural part of China are very tricky. The guide leaves them in the pitch-black night to get directions, leaving Melissa and Yul to fend for themselves. The locals, they soon learn, believe in the story of the Seventh Moon, a time when hungry ghosts roam the Earth in search of human offerings. And worse, this happens to be the one night of the year in which the gates of Hell are open, and locals offer visitors as sacrifices the spirits. Mel and Yul attempt to flee a local village, but are pursued by feral, fast-moving albino creatures hungry for them.

COMMENTARY: Eduardo Sanchez, one of the co-directors of 1999's landmark film, *The Blair Witch Project*, returns to the horror genre with 2008's *Seventh Moon*, a dazzling and effective roller-coaster ride that wastes not a single breath or a single frame. The skillfully crafted *Seventh Moon* actually adopts some of the *Blair Witch*'s specific story points and famous techniques, including the pervasive use of unsteadicam or shaky camera. The important point, however, is that *Seventh Moon* successfully generates and develops a consuming, throat-tightening sense of fear that endures right up until the final, catharsis-inducing frames: a montage of the welcome sunrise after a long, harrowing, moonlit night.

Like *The Blair Witch Project* before it, *Seventh Moon* involves young people of some arrogance, only this time, the movie seems to play into the decade's xenophobia about non-western cultures. The movie also focuses on the truth/fiction of a local legend (the legend of the Seventh Moon rather than Burkittsville's Blair Witch). And, after a wilderness chase, some of the action occurs at a mysterious, isolated house in the woods. Also like *The Blair Witch Project*, the movie plays on the deep fear of being lost, with literally nowhere to turn, and the shaky camerawork ultimately becomes so frenetic that, almost by itself, it forges a sense of hysteria.

But where *The Blair Witch Project* gazed meaningfully at the artificial barriers we construct (such

as modern media) to insulate ourselves from unpleasant facts/reality, *Seventh Moon* offers a more heroic portrait of mankind. Some viewers have apparently asked what's "the point" of all the terror in *Seventh Moon*, but the movie *does* have a point. The narrative concerns marriage, and specifically the idea that sometimes there is no other option than to sacrifice yourself for your loved one. The character in *Seventh Moon* who at first appears weak is the one who ultimately proves strong; the one who broaches that sacrifice. The movie's last view of that character is haunting.

Much of *Seventh Moon*'s drama arises from this crucible of the newlyweds. At first, they bicker relentlessly. "You should have paid more attention to where we were going," Mel accuses Yul at one point. As for Yul, he's stubborn and slow to accept the reality of the horrific situation. In the end, however, both characters cowboy up, and cast-off recriminations for action. And, in harrowing fashion, that action takes the form of a pitch-black excursion into an underworld, into the "nest" of the creatures in a subterranean cave. One of the newlyweds broaches this shadowy Hell with nothing but the light from a cell phone, and the lengthy sequence makes for a nail-biting bit of suspense. The low light and the brief excursions into total blackness enhance the movie's already-keen sense of creeping uncertainty and the terror of an unfamiliar terrain.

Much of *Seventh Moon* is as suspenseful as that dimly lit scene. There's a scene early on during which Yul and Melissa became trapped and surrounded in their damaged car. The ferocious, frenetic monsters attack *en masse*, and the couple is left with no recourse but to rip out a back seat and seek brief sanctuary in the tight confines of the car trunk. The action is so intense that the shots virtually bleed into each other, a flurry of images that suggest unmatched velocity and violence. The shaky camera approach makes the audience feel as though it is right in the thick of the action (not unlike the outstanding *REC*). It's a different approach to visualization, to be sure, but not one nearly so easy to forge as it looks.

Sanchez uses this style exquisitely, much as he did in *The Blair Witch*, and gives the movie a *cinéma vérité*, spontaneous atmosphere that heightens the aura of stark, inescapable terror. At times, when highlighting the action involving the creatures in particular, Sanchez knowingly goes *out of focus* (another quality of the *cinéma vérité* school) and denies viewers the very details their eyes covet. This choice of visual approach maintains the mystery of the monsters' appearance. The ghouls never become so familiar that they lose the capacity to scare the horror. Effective horror is often very much about this idea; about *denying* the audience the very things it seeks: a good, long view at that thing lurking in the dark, for instance.

In *Seventh Moon* Sanchez makes the absolute most of his lighting and camera work to deny viewers any morsel of comfort, either visual or narrative. The film also moves at a blazing pace, denying watchers the time to process entirely what they have witnessed. Like Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *Seventh Moon* is all about showing just enough to frighten, and then artfully pulling back, and permitting the audience's imagination do the heavy lifting and imagine the rest. *Seventh Moon* dispenses with explanations and certainties and gets right to the matter at hand: an all-night descent into Hell itself.

Shutter * * *

Critical Reception

"Fact is, if you've seen *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, *Dark Water* or any Asian horror redo in the past half-decade, there's nothing here you haven't seen—and been more scared of—before."—Kevin Williamson, *The Ottawa Sun*: "Shutter pretty stock stuff," March 22, 2008, page 26.

"Simply put, this is one of the most boring so-called horror flicks I've ever seen. In a strange narrative twist, the script attempts to build suspense by having absolutely nothing happen. The main characters talk in circles and behave predictably, and the actors exhibit no chemistry and give us no reason to care."—Scott A. May, *Columbia Daily Tribune*: "Shutter brings into focus one horrible horror movie," March 27, 2008.

"The remake does have some nice touches. There is more than a hint of frat house sleaze among Ben's male friends in Tokyo, suggesting past indiscretions before Jane was around. The slightly too intimate way Ben's female acquaintances treat him is perfectly calibrated: is there really something for Jane to worry about, or has her judgment been blurred by culture shock? The script unnecessarily tries to clarify details of the haunting that the original left vague (why does the ghost, who prefers to manifest on photographs, first appear in the middle of the road?), but in some cases it improves upon story points, particularly in regard to the revelation of what happened to Megumi."—Steve Biodrowski, *Cinefantastique*, July 8, 2008.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Joshua Jackson (Ben); Rachael Taylor (Jane); Megumi Okina (Megumi); David Denman (Bruno); John Hensley (Adam); Maya Hazen (Seiko); James Kyson Lee (Ritsuo); Yoshiko Miyazaki (Akiko); Daisy Betts (Natasha); Adrienne Pickering (Megan); Pascal Morineau (Wedding Photographer); Eri Otoguro (Yoko); Masaki Ota, Heideru Tasuo (Police).

CREW: 20th Century-Fox and Regency Enterprises presents a New Regency Pictures, Vertigo Entertainment, Ozla Pictures production, *Shutter*. Casting: Donna Isaacson, Christian Kaplan. Production Design: Norifumi Ataka. Music: Nathan Barr. Special Effects: Big X, Pixel Magic. Director of Photography: Katsumi Yanagijima. Film Editors: Tim Alverson, Michael N. Knue. Producers: Doug Davison, Taka Ichise, Roy Lee. Executive Producers: Gloria Fan, Sonny Mallhi, Arnon Milchan. Written by: Kuke Dawon. Directed by: Masayuki Ochiai. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Ben (Jackson) and Jane (Taylor) in Japan accidentally strike a woman on the road on their honeymoon. After the accident, they can find no evidence she ever was there. Soon, however, strange things begin to occur, as the woman, Megumi (Okina), continues to re-appear, and Ben and Jane's wedding photos all show a strange distortion that may have something to do with spirit photography. Megumi begins to systematically kill Ben's friends, and Jane investigates her background. She learns that Ben and her friends share a dark secret about Megumi.

COMMENTARY: The J-Horror remake and "Men Behaving Badly" trends of the 2000s merge in *Shutter*, a well-made effort that reiterates the themes of both forms. In terms of J-Horror, this is another movie with a dark haired, female ghost avenger haunting the living, specifically through an appliance or device (in this case, cameras and film).

And, that avenger has, like the ghost in *What Lies Beneath*, motivations for her reign of terror. In particular, Megumi was raped by Ben's friends, and he did not stop them. In fact, he watched. Although Megumi is dead, her ghost cries out for justice, and in an unforgettable finale, Megumi is literally depicted as sitting on Ben's shoulders; a manifestation of guilt that he can't get out from under. Once more, these films suggest that actions have consequences, karmically speaking, and that even if law enforcement can't do anything to protect women like Megumi from men like Ben, the universe will right the scales of justice.

Ben masquerades in the film as a responsible, attentive spouse, and as a capable professional. It is only when Jane investigates that she learns this is a front; and that he is an entirely different person when in the company of his buddies, or of other men. Jane is horrified when she learns what her husband is capable of. He is like a stranger to her. This is a representation of toxic masculinity in keeping with many films of this type.

"I know it was wrong.... I didn't touch her," Ben notes in defense. Yes, but he also did not help her, or prevent his friends, who surely would have listened to him, to stop the rape. Compare Ben's behavior with the investigator, Jane's. She digs and probes to discover the truth (via a sim card), and when she learns it, she rejects Ben. She leaves him. She acts, where Ben tried to bury the truth, and excuse his behavior. He begs her to stay. "Don't leave me with her!" he implores. Jane leaves anyway.

The Ring features a haunted videotape (and, like *Shutter*, distorted photographs). *Pulse* and *One Missed Call* involve cell phones as portals of evil and death. *Shutter* resurrects another technology that

was becoming antiquated in the 2000s, the Polaroid (also seen this decade in *Mimic 2* and *Dog Soldiers*) and suggests that photography and the camera can reflect our sins, can reflect human crimes and emotional injuries. It is intriguing that both *The Ring* and *Shutter* utilize, for at least part of their running time, technologies that were becoming obsolete in the first decade of the 21st century, as though by falling out of favor, and into dis-use, the VCR or the Polaroid becomes a repository not for our everyday use, but for the use of something inimical, or at the very least, supernatural. It's as though the technologies, now having a "gap" in widespread use, fill that gap with communications from ... *elsewhere*.

As is the case in the 2004 source material, this film occasionally features "flashes" (like a camera flash) to punctuate quiet moments; suggesting that the camera's eye (God's eye?) is ever-present, even if we are unaware of it. There is a powerful scene in the film, with a character in the dark attacked by those flashes, that comes right out of the first film. The remake does do a lot less probing, in close-up, of the creepy spirit photographs, however, and that may or may not be a mistake. The spirit photographs in the original, seen in multitude of shots, suggests the universal presence of spirits. The remake nods to that idea but focuses very much on Megumi's story.

Shutter made good money at the box office but was not well-received by critics in a year in which all the J-Horror/Asian horror remakes were met with cold shoulders (*One Missed Call*, *The Eye*, *Mirrors*). Yet this remake is faithful to the source material and in fact, more strongly criticizes the boyfriend character. The original had that scene of a female grasshopper eating a male's head, suggesting that the ghost avenger was a malicious force, and not, necessarily, that the men she attacked had it coming. The American version misses some of the nice, niche detail, especially as it regards to the spirit photography subplot, but hones-in, laser-like on the toxic masculinity angle, and Jane's discovery of Ben's real nature.

There is an intimate and personal side to this *Shutter* which makes it stand out, at least a little from the pack. Rachel gets involved in a case, in *The Ring*, that ultimately entangles her son. But Aidan is not part of that story to begin with. Similarly, the nurse in *The Grudge* ends up as part of the curse, just by entering the house, but her personal connections in life did not cause that to happen. Even in *Pulse*, there is a phenomenon occurring ... ghosts seeping in through cell phone signals all over the world. In *Shutter*, Ben's bad behavior is the thing that initiates the terror.

By investigating Megumi, Jane is actually destroying her own marriage. The scales fall from her eyes regarding her husband's true nature. He is a coward. She is intimately connected to the outcome of Megumi's story, and that seems a reflection, too, of these types of films. Just as Michelle Pfeiffer's character in *What Lies Beneath* finds herself reckoning with a cheating, murdering husband, Jane finds herself dealing with a man of similar foibles. In both cases, they side with the spirit, not the man who they love; in recognition of the man's misdeeds, or actually, crimes. Because of this, stopping Megumi is not like stopping Samara, for instance. Instead, Jane turns her back on Megumi and Ben, and leaves, re-creating, in a way, the crime that Ben committed. He just stood and watched but did nothing. Jane also does nothing and leaves Ben with his new "wife." It may be right to conclude that Jane realized she has more in common with Megumi than with Ben, and that Megumi has, in fact, saved her from life with a man who would never be true, or faithful to her.

*Sick Nurses (DTV) * * **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Chron Wachanon (Tawan); Wichan Jarujinda (Dr. Taa); Chidjan Rujiphun (Nook); Kanya Rattapetch (Ae); Dollaros Dachaprumwan (Jo); Ase Wange (Yim); Ampairwan Tachapoowapat (Am); Ampairat Techapoowapat (Orn).

CREW: Casting: Chanop Srikamoimas. Production Designer: Punchalee Pinthong. Production Design: Sira

laithong. Film Editor: Manussa Vorasingha. Producers: Akarapol Techaratanapresert, Prchy Pinkaew, Somsak Techaratanapresert. Directed by: Piraphan Laoyont, Thodsapol Siriwat. M.P.A.A. Rating: NR. Running time: 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Bangkok, a philandering and criminal surgeon (Jarujinda) who sells corpses on the black-market recruits six female nurses to help him murder his lover, who discovered that the doctor was in a sexual relationship with her sister. The dead woman's spirit returns to haunt the doctor, and all the nurses. This demonic, spiritual force is out for revenge, and uses the nurses' own foibles and flaws to lead them to their deaths.

COMMENTARY: It is no doubt wrong and, indeed, politically incorrect to champion a crude, silly horror film like *Sick Nurses*. Certainly, it stands a good chance of irritating and offending many viewers.

But I'm going to champion it anyway.

The film's special effects are raw and rough, but also incredibly imaginative. And the film's story is nutty beyond belief, thus similarly innovative. The film's ideas about gender, sexual identity and the like are probably retrograde at best, offensive at worst, and yet the film features a pro-social argument about people who live by shallow, superficial ideals, worshipping themselves at the expense of a deeper morality or sense of justice.

Sick Nurses is gross and exploitative. It isn't for the light-hearted or the sensitive, and, again, it's really, really crude. On the other hand, it absolutely follows in the tradition of other "Men Behaving Badly" movies of the 2000s including *What Lies Beneath* (2000) and *Gothika* (2003) by depicting a world in which a man in a position of power, in this case a powerful doctor, manipulates and controls—and eyes, gaslights—the women in his orbit to get what he wants. The doctor does this, largely unchecked, until a supernatural force steps up to check him.

It's another case of "#MeToo" from beyond the grave.

The nurses who are the doctor's cohorts in murder are not good people, either. They are callow, greedy, self-obsessed narcissists, who, likewise, are meted cosmic justice by the one they wronged. It's not difficult to read the film as an indictment of modern values which champion the superficial and shun the spiritual.

In depicting the spirit's revenge against the doctor, and the against his cadre of sexy (sick) nurses, *Sick Nurses* serves ably, if unexpectedly as a morality play which accounts, in this writer's opinion, for its status as pro-social and therefore worthwhile. One nurse is obsessed with her physical appearance for example. She obsessively exercises and builds muscle, concerned only with her appearance. She is vain to the exclusion of everything else. Another is obsessed with material wealth: with gold and jewels, again to the exclusion of all else. A third just wants to marry the doctor for the social status and is prideful and obsessed with this idea of being a doctor's wife. Again, that's another "surface" value; the need to be seen and admired not for one's own accomplishments, but for her would-be spouse's.

All these "sick" nurses embody Christianity's deadly sins, including, vanity, greed, and pride.

The doctor is no paragon of virtue either. He is a man of apparently great accomplishment. He was awarded "Doctor of the Year," for instance. But the establishment's approbation of the doctor has only given him cover to behave badly, an idea that will be quite familiar to the victims of someone like Harvey Weinstein, or Bill Cosby. The doctor looks respectable but is not. He embodies lust, gluttony, greed, wrath (in the murder of his lover) and pride, among other sins. Some might suggest that the film is misogynistic since it features so many women being punished for their sins, but only one man. But the film also suggests that it is the man who brought out their worst; who encouraged their insecurities, neuroses and pathologies.

By giving jewels to one, he fostered that idea of a material object as a sign of affection, and status. By commenting on physical appearance, he helped another become narcissistically consumed with her body image. The women embody specific sins, for certain, but the doctor, as noted above, is a warehouse

for all of them. His “evil” is that he makes his nurses sick. Indeed, that’s his objective, his way of controlling them. Again, this is a pro social message, even if it is rendered in an exploitive setting.

From a certain perspective, *Sick Nurses* might be viewed as a knock-off of J-Horror in general, and *The Ring*, specifically. It involves another long-haired, female, spectral avenger. And yet, that avenger is depicted, in spite of all the gore, acting according to a moral compass. She punishes evil. Where some folks may (rightly) object is in the background of the character. The murdered woman was actually a man, the doctor’s gay lover, who had a sex change to satisfy him and marry him, but who then was discarded by him. One can see how definitions in orientation here aren’t treated in especially sensitive way. And yet the spectral avenger is the doctor’s victim too; asked and encouraged to change her identity not for him/herself, but for the doctor’s affection. So, the film goes right back to the idea of a male authority figure abusing the women in his life to achieve his own ends.

Sick Nurses is really disgusting, and even though many of the effects are crudely rendered, they get the job done. In addition, one must marvel at their ingenuity and pure value in terms of grossing-out the audience. One character has her face stamped out, as if a cigarette butt, in an ash tray. Another woman has her teeth bashed in. Another is forced to swallow scalpels. One gets a ringing cell phone embedded in the skin of her face, and so forth. It is a catalog of nasty business, but conceived with real, if brutal imagination.

Execution is sometimes a problem, but the shock and awe factor here is real.

Again, I would hate to stake my reputation on a positive review of *Sick Nurses*, but there is a purpose in this exploitation, if one can look past the rampant silliness and take enjoyment in the creative, bloody visual effects.

Splinter (DTV) * * * 1/2

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jill Wagner (Polly Watt); Paulo Costanzo (Seth); Shea Whigham (Dennis Farrell); Rachel Kerbs (Lacey); Charles Baker (Blake Sherman, Jr.); Laurel Whitsett (Sheriff Terri Frankel).

CREW: Magnet Releasing, Content Film International, Indion Entertainment, Kish Productions and Expedition Films present *Splinter*. Casting: Lauren Bass, Chris Freihofer. Production Designer: Jennifer Spence. Special Effects: Quantum Creation FX, Framework Studios. Music: Elia Cmiral. Director of Photography: Nelson Crag. Film Editor: David Michael Maurer. Producer: Kai Barry. Executive Producers: Graham Begg, Chad Burris, Jamie Carmichael, Mark Cuban, Todd Wagner. Written by: Ian Shorr, Kai Berry. Directed by: Toby Wilkins. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A couple, Polly (Wagner) and Seth (Costanzo), is carjacked by a violent criminal, Dennis Farrell (Whigham) and his drugged-out girlfriend, Lacey (Rachel Kerbs). On the road, however, they encounter a strange, spiky parasite that infects animals—and humans—and animates them into mindless, murderous beasts. Polly, Dennis and Seth make it to a gas station for shelter. As the parasite multiplies and lays siege to the filling station, Polly and Seth address the terror they face in very different ways.

COMMENTARY: It’s an age-old debate in the horror genre: *analysis or action?*

What’s more imperative in the tense, grueling crucible for survival: assessing a nightmare scenario fully? Or moving fast and getting the hell out of Dodge before things escalate? That’s the driving character conflict that underlines director Toby Wilkins’ low-budget but high-impact horror movie, *Splinter* (2008). This impressive and intense film lands a young, likable couple in extreme danger from a

murderous, ancient and very hungry parasite in the ancient woods of Oklahoma. Polly is impulsive and quick to act; quick to grab a baseball bat or even plot to burn the gas station down (to draw the attention of a fire crew). By contrast, Seth almost immediately adopts a dispassionate attitude of “data gathering” and seeks to learn as much about the enigmatic enemy as possible before indulging in rash, irreversible action.

Much of the film meditates on the way each character’s distinctive approach succeeds; how each approach fails, with bloody consequences in some cases. It’s no coincidence that Seth’s analytical approach to resolving the crisis involves freezing (or dropping his body temperature), and that Polly’s early gambit (with Farrell) is fire-starting. Each path reflects the character’s true nature. Seth metaphorically runs cold. Polly runs hot.

The best horror movies gaze at this very human dilemma: *how do we arrive at our most important decisions and what are their consequences?* Consider, for example, Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, in which Ben and Cooper argued fruitlessly and endlessly over the best sanctuary location, the basement or the first floor of an under-siege farmhouse. *Splinter* actually merits comparison to that classic because it dwells meaningfully and unceasingly in the details of a similar claustrophobic debate. *Science or violence? Hot or cold? Run or stay?*

Roll the dice, because you only get once chance.

These were not irrelevant issues in the national context of the mid- to late 2000s. America was mired in Iraq because few in the Bush Administration apparently expended the time or energy to consider and weigh the likely consequences of a rash, unnecessary war. The country went to war with a lot of confidence, even arrogance, and it proved to be unjustified. What appears absent in our hyper-polarized national conversation—but what *Splinter* implicitly offers—is an ameliorating sense of balance, particularly in the introduction of a character who can bridge the gulf between action and analysis and travel back and forth between at the right moment.

In the film, this quality arrives in the unlikely and most unexpected of sources: the Carpenter-esque anti-hero and heir to *Assault on Precinct 13*’s Napoleon Wilson: *Dennis Farrell*. Why, Farrell even gets his own catchphrase (“*fuck it,*”) much like famous Carpenter anti-establishment mavericks Wilson, Plissken, Nada and Desolation Williams. But Farrell’s most significant quality is his capacity to roll with the punches and not stay irrationally anchored to one particular viewpoint. He is introduced as menace, harbors a few secrets (including the not-entirely-unexpected secret of his innate nobility) but ultimately saves the day. He succeeds where Seth and Polly fail, though there’s no comfort in it for him. At one point, Farrell is even infected by the monster: he’s hot and cold, victim and victimizer, criminal and hero.

Splinter’s preamble—which involves a redneck in a lawn chair getting attacked by a contaminated rodent menace—relies on the all-to-easy easy vernacular of quick flash cuts and shaky slow-mo photography that are featured in approximately million low-budget horror films of this decade. The visual design of the film is mostly uninspired too: it’s all herky-jerky shaky cam. But film deserves your patience and attention. It builds to a fever pitch, develops characters you come to care about, and is unrelenting in the varied attempts to scare you.

Beyond the clever construction of the script (by Wilkins, Ian Shorr and Kai Barry), which highlights the hot versus cold/action versus analysis dynamic, Wilkins hooks the audience with his gruesome, inventive monster, one that boasts a creepy, rigor-mortis-type gait but isn’t a traditional zombie, and his disciplined sense of pace and ever-escalating horror. One thoroughly impressive set-piece involving Seth’s attempt to wrangle a police radio through a small glass window *utilizing a wire hanger* builds and builds, eliciting a combination of mounting frustration and terror. Another scene, featuring box cutters and a cinder block is similarly harrowing.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Wilkins doesn’t go easy laughs. He hasn’t directed the movie to show-off his knowledge of movie history or show us how smart he is about film technique and post-modernism. Instead, he carefully crafts a solid terror trap, one in which all angles of the story have been considered, and narrative consistency is highlighted. The director treats the material with respect and seriousness, and his sincere, non-joke approach makes the audience care all the more about these

imperiled characters. One might contrast this film with *Feast* for instance: similar plot, similar location, but all style and no substance. Just easy laughs and campy horror. Not so here.

And although at first this author wanted to scribble on my notepad that Wilkins boasts an apparent pathological aversion to long-shots and establishing shots, one can detect now how his visual quiver. (mostly medium shots and close-ups) deliberately crafts a kind of “tunnel-vision” sense of immediacy with the characters. The rigorous tight framing aids the audience in identifying with the leads at the same time that that it affords the audience the possibility of numerous foreground and background shocks and jolts. That’s exactly the kind of equation one desires in a siege picture of this type. The last hour of the film is almost entirely set in a gas station interior, essentially one room, but the film never feels bogged down. Trapped, yes, but not bogged down.

In the final analysis, *Splinter* viscerally recreates Seth and Polly’s war inside you, the viewer. While watching, you may find your intellect constantly at war with your pounding heart. You will feel downright schizophrenic as you shout at the screen for the characters to wait, or hurry; to hide or get moving.

Splinter lives up its advertising: *It’ll get under your skin.*

The Strangers (2008) * * * *

Critical Reception

“...skillfully leverages American middle-class phobias in the early twenty-first century to produce a chilling viewing experience. In a country still psychologically coming to terms with the collective trauma inflicted upon it by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, recent horror films such as *The Strangers* speaks to the memories of that day, as well as the pervasive dread of another attack, by presenting increasingly nihilist scenarios of sudden, unexpected doom in ordinary settings.”—Philip L. Simpson. “There’s Blood on the Walls: Serial Killing as Post-9/11 Terror in *The Stranger*,” page 181. (*Murders and Acquisitions: Representations of the Serial Killer in Pop Culture*, edited by Alzena MacDonald, Bloomsbury, 2013).

“First-time writer-director Bryan Bertino gets right some priceless details as the couple—with nice performances by both leads—try to deal with the evening’s earlier fallout and elevates his movie above other horror films. When the baddies show up and the frights begin, though, we must confess we had to cover our eyes and resume chants of ‘it’s only 85 minutes.’ But overall? Mission accomplished...”—Sara Vilkomerson, *Observer*, May 27, 2008.

“...director Bryan Bertino has absorbed his *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* lessons well...”—Andrew Dowle, *NOW Magazine*: “Slash ‘n’ Burn,” May 29, 2008.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Liv Tyler (Kristen); Scott Speedman (James); Gemma Ward (Dollface); Kip Weeks (Man in Mask); Laura Margolis (Pin-up Girl); Glenn Howerton (Mike); Alex Fisher, Peter Clayton-Luce (Mormon Boys).

CREW: Rogue Pictures, Intrepid Pictures, Vertigo Entertainment, Mandate Pictures and Mad Hatter Entertainment. Casting: Lindsey Hayes Kroeger, David Rapaport. Production Designer: John D. Kretschmer. Music: Tomandandy. Director of Photography: Peter Sova. Film Editing: Kevin Greutert. Producer: Doug Davison, Nathan Kahan, Roy Lee. Executive Producers: Joseph Drake, Marc D. Evans, Kelli Konop, Trevno Macy, Sonny Mallhili. Written and Directed by: Bryan Bertino. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After Kristen (Tyler) turns down James (Speedman’s) marriage proposal, the two go back to a vacation house owned by his family. Unexpectedly, they are relentlessly attacked by a group of masked strangers, who lay siege to the house and the property.

COMMENTARY: Bryan Bertino's *The Strangers* commences ominously with a baritone-voiced off-screen narrator informing viewers that the events of the film are inspired by "a true story." The opening card then reveals further specifics of the crime about to be depicted, including the time frame of the events: the night of February 4, 2005. Students of horror will instantly recognize this opening gambit as one familiar from—again—*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. It's a simple technique that works on the subconscious like a bad itch; one that keeps gnawing because it connects the on-screen horror explicitly and uncomfortably to our "safe" reality.

From there, *The Strangers* transitions to a brief series of slow-motion, fade-in/fade-out views of American houses of all shapes and sizes, ostensibly photographed from the interior of a passing car. The camera moves slowly in these lingering "flashes" from lower-middle class suburbia to upper-class suburbia, to remote, rural territory. Finally, it arrives at the film's central location: a secluded vacation house.

Only much later in the film does the audience realize whose perspective these views actually represent; that we (and the camera with us) are *hunting* with a family of masked predators. We are sizing up the houses *seeking victims*.

Before long, *The Strangers* introduces its two doomed protagonists, twenty-somethings James (Scott Speedman) and Kristen (Liv Tyler), as they arrive late one night at James' family vacation home in the woods. Having just attended a wedding, one might think the couple would be happy, buoyant, or even drunk. But an air of somber anticipation and lugubrious gloom hangs over them. And this is *before* the horror starts. It turns out that Kristen has rejected James' romantic marriage proposal that very night because she "*needs time*." James is understandably dejected over this outcome; Kristen feels conflicted, perhaps even guilty and ashamed at her choice. The characters seem estranged and separated from one another, despite the fact that James has decorated the master bedroom and even the bathtub with scattered rose petals for the would-be momentous occasion.

Impressively, the cinematography and set design reflect this personal estrangement with various autumnal hues that signal the coming winter of the relationship.

This is a movie universe where even the bath water runs rusty-brown.

The house itself, richly visualized in amber, chestnut and terra-cotta, seems almost like a time-capsule tomb, one oddly-out-of-step with the new 21st century. Perhaps it is a testament to a happier, more prosperous past, replete with decorations like an old record player, a heavy piano, and the elaborate woodwork rarely seen in new construction. James and Kristen may be staying there for the night, but importantly this is a home they will never share. Accordingly, the characters seem not to belong there; like their days are numbered. The scattered rose petals portend not a happy honeymoon, but rather a future in which blood spatter on the walls serves as complementary decoration.

As James and Kristen—barely speaking to one another—mechanically initiate sex in this environment, there is a loud and sudden knocking at the house's heavy front doors. Not only is this intrusion scene an example of *coitus interruptus*, it is the vanguard of a horrific home invasion, one that pits Kristen and James against three masked murderers. Throughout the remainder of the film, these killers mercilessly attack the duo with hatchets, butcher knives, and with their Ford pick-up truck. Kristen and James struggle to survive but the killers, who gain entrance to the house regularly, seem to control the house's power and phone lines, and even make off with the couple's cell phones. Every attempt at escape is foiled; every attempt at defense proves futile, or worse, counterproductive.

It's tempting to read all terror this as post-9/11 commentary on the fact that neither oceans, law enforcement, nor locked front doors can save us from an implacable enemy, but in truth *The Strangers* resurrects a sturdy horror trope that long pre-dates the September 11 terror attacks: the household siege (think *Night of the Living Dead*, or another classic savage cinema offering, *Straw Dogs*). But the motive for the terrible attack in *The Strangers* is what makes it feel so modern.

"*You were home*," one of the killers enigmatically informs Kristen, as if that declaration explains anything. And that's about as much information as the movie provides the audience about motivations.

Never once in *The Strangers* is the audience spoon fed some pat reason behind this inexplicable madness. This is a highly realistic, believable, and disturbing approach to the material because people in

James and Kristen's situation are in a life-and-death struggle and rarely have the time to discuss rational things like motivation with their would-be-murderers. That's the press's job in the aftermath, to attempt to place some cultural and historical context on a crime.

The Strangers, in fact, remains so cryptic that it never even reveals the faces of the killers under those creepy masks. The only small insight we get into this killing trio comes near the conclusion of the film, post-killing spree, when the pick-up truck carrying the murderers stops two pre-adolescent boys on bicycles; boys who are handing out Mormon literature. One of the boys asks the older female killer (back to us; to the camera) if she is a "sinner." Her answer is as inscrutable as her identity.

And so the movie provides us almost nothing comfortable or easy to hold onto.

Many movie critics suggested that *The Strangers* is a "vile" film and boasts no socially redeeming qualities. They must think this is so because the movie offers up no pat resolution, no happy ending and not the slightest whiff of explanation. But critics should ask themselves this question: *did Marion Crane have a happy ending, or understand what was happening to her in that shower at the Bates Motel in Psycho?* I would argue that she didn't; and would furthermore argue that *The Strangers* similarly concerns just one piece in what is obviously a much larger killing spree, and that our unlucky protagonists, Kristen and James, are victims in that spree. As such, they are not afforded the decorum of "understanding," or of a perspective of the larger historical view. There's no time for that with Manson-like crazies at the front door, at the window, and in the house. In some clever sense, *The Strangers* treats the audience like victims too. Our hopes rise and fall with each gambit. We seek answers, beg for mercy, and ultimately, find no solace. We try to deny what is to come, even as all hope is lost. But in the end, there is no denying the inevitability of death.

*Trick'r'Treat (DTV) * * * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Dylan Baker (Steven); Rochelle Aytes (Maria); Quinn Lord (Sam); Lauren Lee Smith (Danielle); Moneca Delain (Janet); Tahmoh Penikett (Henry); Brett Kelly (Charlie); Britt McKillip (Macy); Isabelle Deluce (Sara); Jean-Luc Blodeau (Schrader); Alberto Ghisi (Chip); Samm Todd (Rhonda); Anna Paquin (Laurie); Brian Cox (Mr. Kreeg); Leslie Bibb (Emma); Connor Levins (Billy); James Wilson (Alex); Patrick Gilmore (Bud).

CREW: Warner Bros., Legendary Entertainment, Bad Hat Harry Productions and Little Sam Films Present *Trick'r'Treat*. Casting: Stuart Aikins, Sean Cossey, Matthew Lessall, Roger Mussenden. Production Designer: Mark Freeborn. Costume Designer: Trish Keating. Special Effects: Tatopoulos Studios, Rainmaker Animation and Visual Effects, New Deal Studios. Music: Douglas Pipes. Director of Photography: Robert Ivison. Producers: Bryan Singer. Executive Producers: Ashok Amritraj, Michael Dougherty, William Fay, Alex Garcia, Dan Harris, Peter Lhotka. Written and Directed by: Michael Dougherty. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On Halloween night, in picturesque Warren Valley, Ohio, dark spirits emerge to test the citizens' true understanding of the holiday. Among the tales of horror: a high school principal (Baker), hides a dark secret. A strange child-like creature, Sam (Lord) stalks an old man (Cox) who has forgotten the spirit of Halloween, and a school bus of children face a terrible accident and its aftermath.

COMMENTARY: America has always been a melting pot. Our population includes many nationalities, not to mention a host of diverse belief systems. *Even werewolves....*

In some weird but substantive way, that unique concept helps form the psychic and visual gestalt of Michael Dougherty's impressive *Trick 'r' Treat*, a Halloween-themed horror movie. The film is set on Halloween night in the small, affluent town of Warren Valley in Ohio. This is an unusual burg that appears to live and die by the old-fashioned rules of "*trick or treating*"; as though everyone who settled

in this community boasts both a belief and working knowledge of that pagan holiday. In short order, for instance, the audience is informed that “*there are rules*” to be obeyed on this night. And also that this particular holiday is about “*respecting the dead*” because the dead “*roam free ... and pay us a visit*.” The movie also informs the viewer that the rituals of Halloween actually pre-date Christianity, the predominant religion in the United States. The upshot of all this: the “faithful” human citizens of Warren Valley should know not to snuff out jack-o-lanterns till Halloween night is over. And they should keep a stash of candy at the ready to offer the visiting dead since this is the one night of the year when “*the barrier between the living and the dead is the thinnest*.”

So, if the Dutch colonized upper New York State, then perhaps Halloween-worshipping pagans resettled Warren Valley (named after *Famous Monsters of Filmland*’s James Warren?) Accordingly, the dead, the undead, the ghoulish and the monstrous sojourn to this town during this “*magical night*” to partake of the local celebration and worship there. These creatures are the deities—the *Gods using us for their sport*—in this unique slice of America. And it is America and Americana on display here in Warren Valley. The entrancing, beautifully filmed *Trick ‘r’ Treat* is shot to purposefully resemble the idealistic, sentimentalized work of painter Norman Rockwell (1894–1978). According to scholar Scott Eyman, Rockwell “*concentrated on evergreen moments that transcend historical periods and changing times—homecomings, dinners, ritual greetings and leave-takings, communal optimism and support. There is joy and there is sadness, but there is never grief*.”³¹

That description fits to a tee, the visualization of picturesque, lovely Warren Valley in *Trick ‘r’ Treat*. It’s a world of white picket fences, arts-and-craft bungalows, classic automobiles, town parades, families in (ghoulish) celebration and so on. And yet the movie balances the Rockwellian values of religious Warren Valley with the brutal, violent, cruel *Underneath* of those who actually populate it. One possible way to interpret this duality is as an indictment of religion in general; the belief that below the comforting platitudes and “traditional values” of American religion lurks dysfunction, pain, brutality, exploitation, and greed. Again, and again, *Trick ‘r’ Treat* asks the viewer to contemplate both the surface and underneath qualities of a character, location or thing. On the surface, Laurie (Anna Paquin) is an innocent, virginal girl; underneath she is a prowling werewolf. On the surface, Steven (Dylan Baker) is the respectable principal of the local high school; underneath he is a serial killer and child murderer. On the surface, Mr. Kreeg (Brian Cox) lives in a beautiful, well-kept house on a nice street, but inside the house, the decor is as chaotic as his disturbed mental state: ruined and in tatters. On and on it goes: a monster called Sam is mistaken for a child because of his diminutive size, but he is a virtually immortal creature. A little girl named Macy houses the soul not of an innocent child, but a brutal tormentor. Even a story about costumed, developmentally arrested children riding a bus to school on Halloween turns into an indictment of merciless adults. This movie doles out trick after trick in defining the dual nature of residents and monsters in Warren Valley.

The point of it all is that Warren Valley represents the United States in microcosm. Our culture in America and especially our religious culture wears a “mask” that hides its true nature. Under the cloak of propriety, decency and spirituality, there is also poverty, judgment, hypocrisy, theft, abuse, and more. The only notable difference is that in the fictional Warren Valley of *Trick ‘r’ Treat*, the Gods of the believers descend or ascend to Earth and brutally punish the wicked. Accordingly, many of the human characters in the film are vicious, murdering, lying bastards and the Gods of Halloween punish them for their trespasses. It’s the old EC Comics formula of “*cosmic scales of justice righted*,” writ large, but played as modern social commentary thanks to the ubiquitous presence of the Rockwellian surfaces.

Although the comic-book opening credits of *Trick ‘r’ Treat* connect the audience to the familiar format of the horror anthology, like *Creepshow* (1981) or *Tales from the Crypt* (1972), Dougherty’s film has even been structured as a melting pot of sorts. All the stories are blended together, and the overall chronology of the night is shuffled. In other words, the stories are not separated by discreet beginnings or endings, but roll seamlessly into each other, going backwards and forwards in time, in order to forge this sense of contemporaneous happenings: the rituals and rites of Halloween happening simultaneously across this small town where the holiday is of such importance.

The story that works best in *Trick ‘r’ Treat* involves Cox, his dog Spite, and their nocturnal visitor,

Sam, a truly creepy yet oddly child-like creature bent on getting either a trick (meaning death) or treat. This story is particularly scary and surprising, whereas some of the earlier material, especially Dylan Baker's tale, are effective but not overtly terrifying. Baker's vignette, however, features one of the best on-screen vomiting moments since *Stand by Me* (1986) or at least *Team America: World Police* (2004).

Trick 'r' Treat is mesmerizing. Dougherty has directed a beautifully designed and exquisitely executed film. It is also breathtaking in its epic sense of human cruelty, brutality, and ugliness, even when dealing with children. But that's likely the point. This highly religious community, Warren Valley, isn't prepared to be judged by the draconian edicts of its own stated belief system. And that's a statement that also goes for a lot of real people dwelling in more mainstream faiths than Halloween worship. People don't always practice what they preach. In Warren Valley, that's a mortal sin.

Twilight * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"...although I found the film too long, too slow and too soft, I enjoyed myself. *Twilight* is not just a cult phenomenon; it's a pretty good movie in its own right, even if it may not go far beyond its target audience. Girls are going to love it way more than anyone else, and the boys who get dragged along—or check it out expecting action-packed fantasy—may be bored senseless. But for such a conventional movie, *Twilight* is rather unusual. A rare example of a teenage chick flick that doesn't surrender to the usual formula, it's an unconditional romance from an unapologetically female viewpoint."—Brian D. Johnson, *Macleans*: "*Twilight* of the Goths," November 21, 2008.

"It's a recognizable coming of age story with a fiendish twist. Director Catherine Hardwicke showed her understanding of teen girl angst in her early film, *Thirteen* (2003), and she was able to bring a similar energy and authenticity to the first book's adaptation, along with screenwriter Melissa Rosenberg."—Kathi Maio, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, March 5, 2020.

"Compared to the rest of the *Saga*, *Twilight* is downright weird. It's strangely quiet, and visually vibrant, full of lush, wet, green forest. Dramatic scenes of Bella reading about vampires are cut with gothic black and white erotic daydreams of Edward bending over her like Dracula, her vivid red blood dripping out of his mouth. And aside from one confrontation towards the end, it's not really an action movie. Like *Thirteen*, Hardwicke's debut feature from 2003 starring Evan Rachel Wood and Nikki Reed (who also appears in *Twilight*), the film takes teen emotions seriously, portraying them without judgement. That approach is perhaps what threw off so many of the film's critics, so quick to look down on the intended audience. The result is a film that can veer too sharply into earnestness, but very convincingly portrays a teenage girl's struggle to reconcile the tornado of hormones roiling within her."—Anne Cohen, *Refinery29*: "*Twilight* Was Savaged by Critics—But Did It Deserve All That Hate?," November 14, 2018.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kristen Stewart (Bella Swan); Robert Pattinson (Edward Cullen); Sarah Clarke (Renee); Matt Bushell (Phil); Billy Burke (Charlie Swan); Gil Birmingham (Billy Black); Taylor Lautner (Jacob Black); Gregory Tyree Boyce (Tyler); Justin Chon (Eric); Michael Welch (Mike Newton); Anna Kendrick (Jessica); Christian Serratos (Angela); Nikki Reed (Rosalie); Kellan Lutz (Emmet Cullen); Ashley Greene (Alice Cullen); Jackson Rathbone (Jasper).

CREW: Summit Entertainment, Temple Hill, Maverick Films, Imprint Entertainment, Goldcrest Pictures and Twilight Productions present *Twilight*. Casting: Deborah Aquila, Tricia Wood. Costume Designer: Wendy Chuck. Music: Carter Burwell. Director of Photography: Elliot Davis. Film Editor: Nancy Richardson. Producers: Wyck Godfrey, Greg Mooradian, Mark Morgan. Executive Producers: Michele Imperato-Stabile, Guy Oseary, Karen Rosenfelt. Based on the novel by: Stephenie Meyer. Written by: Melissa Rosenberg. Directed by: Catherine Hardwicke. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 122 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Teenager Bella Swan (Stewart) leaves Phoenix to live in tiny Forks, Washington, with her father Charlie (Burke), the local police chief. On the first day at her new high school she encounters Edward Cullen (Pattinson), a smoldering but very pale outcast. As she soon learns, he's a very old vampire, and he's hot for Bella. Slowly, Edward introduces Bella to his vampire family, a de-fanged bunch of "assimilated" vampires who don't kill humans, and who think of themselves as "*vegetarians*." The daddy vampire is the local doctor, actually. Unfortunately, a trio of non-vegetarian vampires soon blow into town and want to make a meal of Bella. The Cullens muster their considerable resources to stop the bad vampires, all just in time for the senior prom, which Edward and Bella attend together.

COMMENTARY: Do you know the only time when a cliché isn't really a cliché?

It's the first time *you* encounter it.

A cliché is not a cliché to the young. A viewer (or reader's) relative youth, inexperience, or lack of knowledge base makes the story feel new to them. That's a relevant fact to consider when reviewing the film *Twilight* (2008), essentially a vampire-human Harlequin romance based on the best-selling novels by Stephenie Meyer and designed for the specific age demographic of thirteen-year-old girls.

So, this movie wasn't made for me.

And that's just fine. Why would I want to deny a young audience the opportunity to experience its own vampire love story?



Robert Pattinson is Edward Cullen, vampire, in *Twilight* (2008).

That established, *Twilight* is no *Let the Right One In*, a haunting 2008 vampire tale concerning wasted youth, stolen lives and alienated adolescence. That great film boasts nuance, subtlety, and a recognition of life's vicissitudes and defeats. By contrast, the James Dean-type undead characters of *Twilight* feel like Abercrombie and Fitch-style poseurs. Of course, *Twilight* isn't trying to be *Let the Right One In* either. That point requires clarity too.

The point is merely that if someone hasn't watched *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (and specifically the Angel years from 1997 to 1999), or hasn't yet read the works of Anne Rice, and also hasn't seen *Dark Shadows*, *Near Dark*, *Fright Night*, *The Lost Boys* or *Let the Right One In*, *Twilight* may indeed seem new, vibrant and alive. Given that degree of youth, it might even seem revelatory.

On the other hand, however, if you're old enough or curious enough to remember those productions (and no doubt countless others), *Twilight* feels old hat and unnecessarily lugubrious. The romance isn't that affecting; the scares aren't that scary, and the characters are dreary. The pace is slow, the special effects are bad, and the narrative is but a long wind-up for the inevitable sequel. Even the look of the film is derivative. *Twilight* cribs the visual palette from *The Ring* (2002), all foreboding fog and steely Washington State silvers.

But here's the thing, *Star Wars* came out in 1977, and was a pastiche of 1930s' space adventures re-purposing an "old" story (*Buck Rogers*, *Flash Gordon*, etc.) in a modern fashion with breakthrough special effects and a 1970s vibe.

It felt new.

Raiders of the Lost Ark accomplished the same miracle in 1981, taking 1930s cliffhanger tropes and re-purposing them for a more realistic time.

It felt new.

One might even discuss the romantic *Titanic* (1997), which re-told a story—*essentially*—that had already been dramatized in 1958's *A Night to Remember* but did so with the state-of-the art effects.

It felt new too.

And *Buffy*? Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was nothing less than a watershed re-crafting of an entire genre, presenting the ultimate evolution of the "final girl" horror film archetype and defining high school as a Hell of monsters and ghouls.

In all these instances, that which had been old, familiar and clichéd was rendered new or at least new *seeming* under the auspices of updated special effects, a fresh perspective or world view, and nostalgia, among other factors.

But if you'll pardon the pun, what new territory does *Twilight* stake out?

In what fresh way does *Twilight* vet its Romeo and Juliet tale? How does it add meaningfully to a century of vampire stories?

Does *Twilight* tell us something new about the very nature of vampires themselves?

The answer to all these questions? *Not really*.

Twilight is so solemn about inconsequential things that it's silly, but again, that may be a viewpoint that comes only with age and a wide viewing experience

Perhaps the film's greatest drawback arises in the central romance between Edward and Bella. What's missing is some sense of gravitas. Instead, the movie goes out of its way to make their romance seem like something well within the bounds of normal human experiences. Edward can go out in the sun (his skin looks like glittery diamonds) without burning up. He can also control his appetites (drinking blood is apparently like quitting smoking in this universe), and he attends high school.

Though, of course, why on Earth would he want to?

Most teenagers are dying to get out of high school, not attend it for a veritable eternity.

The vampires of the film are so easily incorporated in our culture, in fact, that they come off as nothing but another ethnic group.

So, *what's the fuss about?* Is Edward "*dead*?" Well, if he is, he's having a good time. He's got a great house, and a terrific CD collection, after all.

The fuss *should* have been about the fact that if Bella chooses to share Edward's world, she would cut off future options. The ability to have children, perhaps (though the movie glosses over this

eventuality and in future movies, they do have a child.)

But by making Edward's world so appealing and normal, *Twilight* will have audiences thinking that we should all be vampires! It's kind of selfish for the Cullens not to turn everyone, isn't it? Wouldn't you like to be immortal ... and hot? With a great CD stash?

Edward probably has a kickin' MySpace page.

So why is *Twilight* so divisive among horror fans? On the first count, there is a widespread dislike of Bella, and her portrayal by Stewart. As depicted in the films there is nothing special, unique or interesting about this female character. It is acknowledged, actually that Edward loves her because of her scent.

All vampires love her because of her scent.

The character possesses no real characteristics or personality that would make her intrinsically interesting. She isn't especially, witty, funny, or widely intelligent, either. She is the opposite of Buffy in this regard. Bella has no agency, no desires for anything other than to be Edward's beloved. She's a dull character and her lack of heroic qualities is weird. Edward describes Bella, to her face, as his own personal brand of heroin. That's the problem in a nutshell.

To him, she's not a person, she's a thing, a drug.

This is a great romance?

What might be an argument in support of the film? Outside the drippy, strange and oddly unappealing central romance, there is a strong metaphor here. The vampires are stand-ins for immigrants. All immigrants, when coming to the United States, have, historically, had three options in terms of how to deal with the New World. They can assimilate (adopting all the rituals and customs of their new culture), accommodate (take on some aspects of the new culture, and maintain some aspects of their own culture), or separate (choose a place away from the new culture and its people).

The Cullen clan's approach is actually closer to accommodation than assimilation. They still have their vampire appetites (which they suppress), and their vampire rituals, but they also play baseball together on the weekends. Baseball, of course, is known as the American pastime, showcasing its importance in the culture of the United States. But when the Cullens get together to play, they play this very American game ... as *vampires*; using all of their vampire instincts and abilities. So, they have learned to be both American (and human) and kept their nature as monsters.

In this way, *Twilight* actually discusses immigration in the United States, and settles on the side that immigrants can serve their new culture in a positive way.

When it comes down to it, after all, the Cullens take on the meat-eater vampires, and defend their new culture. They would be in the Coalition of the Willing, one feels, in any War on Terror.

Gazing at the film's pro-immigration argument, one may find some admirable qualities here, perhaps.

But again, *Twilight* wasn't made for me and I know that.

Does that make it a terrible film? *No, not really.* It's competently made, and at times, thanks to its natural vistas in the Pacific Northwest, it occasionally borders on beautiful.

So, lastly, here's the thing about *Twilight* that some will find bothersome. Today's youth have some real built-in pop culture advantages. They have Netflix, the Internet, cable television, social media and iPhones. Therefore, *they have the tools at their disposal* that would help them see rather plainly that *Twilight* is derivative, dull and formulaic, not trendy, new and heartfelt. It's one thing not to see a cliché because you're young and impressionable and haven't been around the block. It's another thing altogether not to recognize a cliché because you're not looking hard enough; because you're merely incurious about that which has come before.

Based on the film, I have to chalk up *Twilight*'s popularity to just that: *a lack of curiosity.*

As for the entire *Twilight Saga*? This film is the high point, at least in terms of story, structure and metaphor. It's a quick and messy descent into pure terribleness from here.

As Edward Cullen might note at this juncture: "*I hope you enjoy disappointment.*"

Vacancy 2: The First Cut (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Agnes Bruckner (Jessica); David Mosco (Gordon); Scott G. Anderson (Smith); Arjay Smith (Tanner); Trevor Wright (Caleb); Beau Billingslea (Otis); Brian Klugman (Reece); Juanita Jennings (Doris); Nelson Lee (Groom); Gwendoline Yeo (Bride); Judy Durning (Wife); David Shackelford (Truck Driver); Lola Davidson (Woman); Don Oscar Smith (Man); Joe Reegan (Jack); Chris Nelson (Sheriff).

CREW: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment and Stage 6 Films presents *Vacancy 2: The First Cut*. Casting: Kelly Wagner. Production Designer: Stephen McCabe. Costume Designer: Heidi Zimmerman. Special Effects: Quantum Creation FX. Music: Jerome Dillon. Director of Photography: Horacio Marquinez. Film Editor: Angela M. Catanzaro. Based on characters created by: Mark L. Smith. Written by: Mark L. Smith. Directed by: Eric Bross. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 2004, the owners of the out-of-the-way Meadow View Inn in North Carolina record couples having sex at the motel without their knowledge. When one deranged visitor to the motel, however, kills a woman, and then has sex with her corpse, the voyeurs at the motel graduate to snuff film, and began selling their murder tapes for profit. The first victims of this new murder-on-video ring are a trio of youngsters on a road trip. Caleb (Wright) is in love with Jessica (Bruckner), who is pregnant, despite the fact that they are not married. Tagging along to visit her parents and tell them the news, is Caleb and Jessica's friend, Tanner (Smith). Soon, the trio is fighting for survival, as the murderers at the motel launch their attacks.

COMMENTARY: *Vacancy 2: The First Cut* is a better-than-expected direct-to-video sequel to 2007's Hitchcockian paean to voyeurism. The sequel is relatively intense, and gorier than the first go-round. It also feels more in tune with the 2000s horror vibe, which was not sex, but rather degrading and unrelenting violence. One of the characters in the film states that “*Nobody buys porn anymore. But killing? Killing’s different.*”

That comment is a revelation for the voyeur-turned-entrepreneurs in the film, and also feels very much like a commentary on the era that gave the world *Saw* (2004), *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005), and Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* (2007), among other highly disturbing, incredibly violent horror films. One of the voyeurs also notes, correctly that “*there is a market for this kind of video,*” and that too seems true in the post-9/11 age. American culture during this era grew far more wary of films with sexual content, but films of all genres—including religious genres—delved head-first into horrific violence and audiences ate it all up. The goriest film of the 2000s, after all, is not *Saw*. It’s Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* (2004).

Vacancy 2 is violent indeed. It starts with necrophilia and then graduates to the sustained threat of violence against a young woman who is pregnant. This is a world where good deeds don’t go unpunished. A helpful Christian couple that lives near the motel, attempts to help the endangered youngster. They are murdered by the snuff-videographers in cold blood without a second thought. The film also reverberates with 2000s style horror in the way that it testifies to the power of the video camera, or filmmaking, if one prefers. The voyeurs, knowing that they are recording everything, and have to put on a good show for their customers, take greater risks and give into their worst impulses, acknowledging that “*the chase is half the fun.*”

Like *Hostel*, the *Vacancy* series postulates murder as a business, and murderers as entrepreneurs. This might be read as a commentary on a society with increasingly gory tastes, or even as a comment on corporations, which have stopped caring, necessarily, about the welfare of the customers, but are simply out to make a quick buck.

It’s true that *Vacancy 2* is not the elegant, first-rate, high-minded technical masterpiece that the

first film was. It is much rawer, much naughtier, and much cynical in some ways. It feels less like abstract, intellectual, film-studies type gamesmanship and more urgent, and immediate. Detracting from the film, however, is the depiction of the main characters. Although they are given a crisis (like the looming divorce faced by the couple in the first film), it doesn't really amount to anything. And Tanner is depicted in a very clichéd (if not racist) fashion as the fast talking, sassy black sidekick. The shallowness of the characters makes the action feel less close, even if the intensity, as noted above, is ramped up.

Still, in an era of direct-to-video exploitation of brand names (think: the milquetoast *I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer* [2006]), *Vacancy 2* makes the transition to this format without losing as much of its key "brand" identity. It's well shot, suspenseful, brutal, and clearly of its time period.

White Noise II: The Light (DTV) * ½

Cast & Crew

CAST: Nathan Fillion (Abe Dale); Katee Sackhoff (Sherry Clarke); Craig Fairbrass (Henry Caine); Adrian Holmes (Marty Bloom); Kendall Cross (Rebecca Dale); Teryl Rothery (Julia Caine); William MacDonald (Dr. Karras). Joshua J. Ballard (Danny Dale); David Milchard (Kurt); Tegan Moss (Liz); Michael Ryan (Homeless Man); Chris Shields (Father Nathan); David Orth (Dr. Serling).

CREW: Bright Light Pictures, in association with Gold Circle Films, Rogue Pictures and Universal Pictures presents *White Noise 2: The Light*. Casting: Maureen Webb. Production Design: Andrew Neskorumny. Costume Designer: Maya Mani. Special Effects: Cinebyte Digital, Inc. Image Engine Design Inc. Technicolor Creative Services, Vancouver, Frantic Films. Music: Normand Corbeil. Director of Photography: Brian Pearson. Film Editing: Tom Elkins, Patrick Lussier. Producer: Shawn Williamson. Executive Producers: Paul Brooks, Stephen Hegyes, Scott Niemeyer. Written by: Matt Venne. Directed by: Patrick Lussier. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After his wife and son are gunned down before his eyes in a diner, Abe Dale (Fillion) experiences an NDE (Near Death Experience). When Abe regains consciousness, he briefly teams with a doctor studying EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomena) to learn more about his visions. When that doctor also dies, Abe is left to puzzle out his condition alone. Soon, he realizes he can see the auras of those around him who are going to die. He begins to intervene, saving the lives of those fated to die, until he realizes that a dark force does not appreciate his meddling in divine affairs.

COMMENTARY: With this ludicrous and poorly made sequel, the *White Noise* franchise accomplishes in one movie, what it took the *Hellraiser* films two decades to achieve: a collapse into mind-numbing stupidity.

This film appropriates the plot of an old *Twilight Zone* episode, throws Satan into the mix as a last-ditch effort to create interest, and finally climaxes with searing incoherence. Where the first film was smartful, smart and moving, *White Noise 2: The Light* is a disappointing cheese-fest, and the fact it features two well-regarded science fiction TV stars, Nathan Fillion and Katie Sackhoff, only makes it feel like a misbegotten Syfy Channel offering.

White Noise 2 opens with Abe and his family being shot in a diner, and yet it is staged so badly that viewers would be forgiven if believing the whole scene is a dream. There are no blood stains, for instance, on the victims, and no blood at all during the attack. There are no wounds visible on anyone, and not even Abe, who is cradling the dead, has any stains on his clothing. Perhaps this is an effort to keep the movie PG-13, but the result is that the scene doesn't play as either real, or believable. The film's special effects are, similarly, reality shattering. When Abe experiences his NDE, we see Nathan Fillion

hurling through a green-screened void, ostensibly on wires, and the moment is ridiculous and unconvincing.

The original *White Noise* involved EVP, and *White Noise 2* picks the subject of NDEs for its central topic, but unlike the first film, it is not satisfied simply to explore that idea. Instead, it starts focusing on auras, “de-tuned receivers,” and then goes into a strange conspiracy theory and code involving Satan’s involvement in the cycle of life and death. The film doesn’t possess the restraint or the dignity to actually just focus on one topic that the screenwriters know something about, instead ping-ponging between multiple concepts, none of which are handled adequately

Worse, the film cribbs from a 1960 episode of *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1961) called “The Purple Testament.” In that story, a military officer would see a purple glow—an aura—around soldiers who were destined to die in the next battle. Here, of course, Abe sees the aura around those who will perish next. As if to put an explanation point on the similarity, a doctor in the film is named Serling, after *Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling. That series was almost always well-written, and the same cannot be said of *White Noise 2*. Here, for example, Abe sees a little girl’s aura, and does nothing to help her before she dies. Then, he sees a couple in love, with glowing aura, and does nothing to help them, either. But, when he happens upon a hobo on railroad tracks far below an overpass, he runs out of his way to help the man.

Why act to save this man, now, but not those other people? It makes no sense.

White Noise’s dumbest twist is saved for last. When Sherry is endangered, Abe literally turns into lightning, to pursue Sherry, who is in a speeding ambulance. So not only can he see auras, Abe can also transform into pure energy. This ability sets up a *Final Destination*-esque set-piece that feels piped in from another movie. *White Noise 2* also features imagery familiar from fans of *Don’t Look Now* (1973), when Abe spies the aura of a girl wearing a red slicker. And on the TV plays *The Bride of Frankenstein*, in which a character notes that “modern medicine has no limits.”

And another doctor in the hospital? Named Karras, after the priest in *The Exorcist* (1973). All these touches suggest that the filmmakers were familiar with horror history, and yet the film is still clueless about generating terror, building character, or staging an action sequence.

Unoriginal and uninspired, with bizarre plot twists, such as the idea that Satan is behind NDEs, *White Noise 2: The Light* is just about the most inferior sequel to the source material that one could possibly imagine. The dialogue in the film notes “you have to accept what it’s supposed to be about,” but fortunately the audience is under no such obligation.

The X-Files: I Want to Believe * * * ½

Critical Reception

“...it challenges the viewer to consider certain moral imperatives in a season devoted to films revolving around explosions and fart jokes...”—Charles Koplinski, *Illinois Times*, August 17, 2009.

“*I Want to Believe* comes off like a solid—if not great—episode from one of the show’s early seasons, a reasonably suspenseful story made by a director with a sturdy sense of how to tell a story. Yet it’s the very modesty of *I Want to Believe* that makes it so admirable. Carter doesn’t try to meet or exceed fans’ expectations so much as create an intimately scaled dramatic universe for his fiercely beloved characters, Dana Scully and Fox Mulder, to inhabit, circa 2008.”—Stephanie Zacharek, *Salon*, July 25, 2008.

“While Carter has engaged the audience on an ethical level, he has thrown a wedge between his protagonists and their fans. On the show, the viewer would solve the mystery along with Mulder and Scully. In the movie, the clues are revealed to the audience, while others remain in the dark. As a result, the sense of suspense key to a supernatural thriller is diminished. The film also skimps on plot; don’t expect the clever, intricate twists of the series. It feels like a wan version of the show—one that has lost its otherworldly edge.”—Claudia Puig, *USA Today*, July 25, 2008.

Cast & Crew

CAST: David Duchovny (Fox Mulder); Gillian Anderson (Dana Scully); Amanda Peet (Dakota Whitney); Billy Connolly (Father Joseph Crissman); Xzibit (Agent Mosley); Mitch Pileggi (Walter Skinner); Callum Keith Rennie (Janke Dacshyn); Adam Godley (Father Ybarra); Alex Diakun (Gaunt Man); Nicki Aycox (Cheryl Cunningham); Fagin Woodcock (Franz Tomczeszyn); Marco Niccoli (Christian Fearon); Carrie Ruscheinsky (Margaret Fearon); Spencer Maybee (Blair Fearon); Peatrick Keating (Slight Man); Stephen E. Miller (Feed Store Proprietor); Xantha Radley (Monica Bannan); Lorena Gale (Doctor); Sarah-Jane Redmond (Special Agent).

CREW: Twentieth Century–Fox, Ten Thirteen Productions, in association with Dune Entertainment IIII present *The X-Files: I Want to Believe*. Casting: Heike Brandstatter, Mindy Marin, Coreen Mayrs. Production Designer: Mark Freeborn. Costume Designer: Lisa Tomczeszyn. Music: Mark Snow. Special Effects: WCT Productions, Entity FX, Hybride Technologies, Lindala Schminken FX. Director of Photography: Bill Roe. Film Editor: Richard A. Harris. Producers: Chris Carter, Frank Spotnitz. Executive Producer: Berent O'Connor. Written by: Frank Spotnitz and Chris Carter. Directed by: Chris Carter. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Six years after leaving behind the FBI over their knowledge of a nefarious global conspiracy, behavioral psychologist Fox Mulder (Duchovny) and medical doctor Dana Scully (Anderson) live together in a small, comfortable house far away from the world. Their retreat is shattered, however, when the FBI needs their help regarding a strange new case, a new X-File. Agent Monica Bannan has gone missing in wintry West Virginia, and a former priest—and pedophile—Father Joe (Connolly) claims to possess psychic knowledge of the crime. His claims are boosted when he leads the FBI to the agent's corpse, buried in an ice field. While Scully works in a Catholic hospital to save a sick little boy whose prognosis is likely terminal, Mulder throws himself into the case. Even as Mulder and Scully grow estranged from one another over the particulars of the case and the truth of Father Joe's vision, the duo tracks down the murderers, and finds a strange case of a scientist illicitly involved in gruesome transplant surgery.

COMMENTARY: Quite brilliantly, *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* states the quiet part out-loud. The long-running series' famous mantra, “*the truth is out there*,” isn't really what the series was ever about. The truth is not out there, in UFOS, monsters, or conspiracies.

Rather, the truth is inside us, and inside Mulder and Scully. The truth is in the way they face the world and the way that we, the audience, reckon with it.

This movie's secondary title, *I Want to Believe* hints artfully at the mind-set of the creators involved. The movie offers an examination not of aliens, cryptids, or nefarious governments, but of the way that two very human characters, Mulder and Scully, contend with their differing world views and each other. They each want to believe in different things. But they both want to believe in each other too.

On a related note, this movie makes it easy to believe in *The X-Files* again. *I Want to Believe* is an intimate, small horror movie about real people which was unfortunate enough to be released in an era when viewers wanted big blockbusters (such as *The Dark Knight* [2008]). It is a human movie released in an era when superheroes were rising, and audiences didn't want heroes with feet of clay, but spectacle and special effects. The greatest crime this movie committed was being true to the series' lineage and the “*monster of the week formula*” it popularized (and which was imitated, badly, on later series such as *Smallville* [2001–2011] and *Fringe* [2008–2012]). This movie doesn't answer fan questions about UFOS or the global conspiracy, but it does ask the right questions about the human heart, the human soul. In its low-budget form and sturdy film grammar, the film plays more like a series episode from the early seasons, perhaps the second or third, than the era in which the series was a global phenomenon.



The X-Files: I Want to Believe (2008) brought David Duchovny's agent Fox Mulder out of retirement.

However, critic reviews of the film were mostly savage, save for a few. Fans, general audiences and reviewers apparently felt betrayed by the fact that *The X-Files*' creators decided to dramatize a horror movie story, instead of craft a narrative that was an alien-centered blockbuster. The savage blowback no doubt came as a shock to the filmmakers, as, from the very beginning, they had alternated the so-called "Mytharc" stories with their "Monster of the Week" stories. The same is true of the film franchise. 1998's *Fight the Future* is a Mytharc Story, and 2008's *I Want to Believe* is a Monster of the Week story, or in this case, a modern-day Frankenstein story.

Atmospheric, human, and quite intimate, *I Want to Believe* features little violence, so that most of the film's fireworks are emotional ones. The film's suspenseful climax involves an icy setting, an operating theatre, and cross-cutting, but not CGI, gunfire or chases. For some, perhaps, this was a bridge too far. For others, the film is a return to the series at its best and most lugubrious pondering

issues of the human soul through the double lens of belief (Mulder) and skepticism (Scully). The wintry location in West Virginia becomes a supporting character in the play and is beautifully photographed. The frozen landscape is the backdrop for a story, ironically, of love, and the juxtaposition is powerful.

I Want to Believe's concerns seem not only non-commercial, but anti-commercial, and that may be another factor that spelled doom for the film with fans and critics. Specifically, the film ponders the Christian ideal of redemption, and asks if redemption is possible even for a man who has committed a terrible crime, in this case, pedophilia. Scully, a devout Catholic, believes not; that Father Joe is a monster. She believes his visions are fakes. Mulder, open to extreme possibilities, looks for possibilities outside dogma. There is nothing comfortable or easy about how this film portrays the central moral dilemma. The crimes Father Joe committed against the innocent are utterly monstrous, as Scully rightly points out. Father Joe knows that society will never forgive him but wonders if God might do so, if only he does a good deed; if he can use his visions to save the imperiled agent.

Again, the film doesn't shy away from the particulars of Father Joe's story, and for certain, the notion of a fallen priest who sexually abused minors is not the stuff of summer blockbusters, though certainly one might argue that the darkness inherent in the tale is perfect for a meditative horror movie. As the movie reveals, Father Joe castrated himself at age 26 in order to "kill" the horrible, seething appetite, the "monster" that led him to commit his crimes. And now, Father Joe chooses to live in a group home for pedophiles, one where sex offenders live in shame and monitor each other's behavior. It is a sort of Hell on Earth to live among such criminals, especially for a man of faith. He punishes himself, every day.

Is this not enough?

In exploring Father Joe's story and his choices, the movie's underlying moral quandary is this: What great "right" can undo a great "wrong?"

And in the enlightened tradition of *The X-Files*, Scully and Mulder view Father Joe and his predicament in radically different ways. The series always concerned the opposing viewpoints of these two characters, and how their beliefs and biases shaped their perception of reality. It's the same thing here. Scully believes Father Joe is a depraved attention-seeking monster, that his visions are a hoax and a cry for attention. Mulder wants to believe that men like Father Joe *can* change, that redemption is possible, and that Father Joe's psychic visions are legitimate.

Perhaps the mirror that *I Want to Believe* holds up for audiences is simply too bracing, too controversial. It is easy to forgive someone who seems heroic; someone who is beautiful; or someone who had an excuse for what he did. But what about forgiving someone flawed? Forgiving someone for committing the worst crime imaginable? If you aren't willing to take into account good works, or repentance, then the inference is that you don't believe in redemption. And if you don't believe in redemption and forgiveness, you can't claim to be a Christian. Forgiveness of sin, after all, is the beating heart of that belief system. Scully finds it very hard to forgive in the film, despite the fact of her faith. Mulder, who is not grounded by such dogma, is more willing to see Father Joe as a flawed human. This paradigm, this exploration of a difficult issue, is true to everything *The X-Files* has always been about.

The film's horror mystery, and monster of the week also have a grounding in series history. Over the years, many episodes have concerned the irresponsibility of scientists who push too far, too fast. Stories such as "Lazarus" and "The Post-Modern Prometheus," like *The X-Files: I Want to Believe*, might rightly be said to be children of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. *I Want to Believe* writes a new chapter in this tradition with a strange but compelling plot concerning organ transplants, stem cell research, and a cadre of outlaw Russian scientists playing Frankenstein. The human motivation behind the transplants, however, is a mirror for Mulder and Scully too.

It involves the inability of a scientist to accept the mortality of his male lover. He attempts to prolong a life beyond reason, beyond compassion, beyond all bounds of science. This is an imperfect mirror for Scully's quest in the film to save a terminally ill boy. The resulting mirror plot lines are a meditation on the definition of ethical medicine.

Where is the line drawn between unorthodox treatment, and madness?

Another theme featured in this sequel is the "burying" and cleansing of the past. The criminals

responsible for Bannion's abduction attempt to bury their murder in the ice. Mulder hopes to cleanse his past too, believing that if he just saves this one woman, he will have made up for failing his sister all those years ago. Scully, by saving her patient believes she can be cleansed of her guilt over William, the son with Mulder she had to give up for adoption.

All of this burying of the past is contrasted with Father Joe's approach. He possesses a history anyone would want to bury, deny or hide. But instead of denying his crimes, he faces his past. He digs up his past (literally, in the snow and the ice), and faces the things that keep coming to the surface, and that must be dealt with.

I Want to Believe is a dark film, and perhaps the darkest chapter in *The X-Files*' long history. But it is also a hopeful film, and one that explores, beautifully, the notion that the truth is within us, not out there in monsters, myths, or madmen. On its release, the critical narrative was that the film betrayed the series rich legacy. But through its careful filmmaking, and meticulously explored theme of redemption, seen from multiple perspectives, the opposite is true.

TIMELINE: 2009

January 9: A Labor Department report assesses the damages of the Great Recession. Nearly two million jobs were lost between September and December of 2008, George W. Bush's final months in office.

January 16: Circuit City, one of the largest electronics retailers in the United States, closes all its stores, ending nearly 35,000 American jobs.

January 20: Barack Obama is sworn in as the 44th President of the United States.

March 9: The Dow Jones bottoms out at 6,547 (after a high in 2007 of 14,164).

March 13: The Federal Reserve reports that in 2008, Americans lost 18 percent of their wealth.

April 7: Vermont legalizes same-sex marriage.

April 24: The World Health Organization warns the world about the dangers of swine flu.

June 11: Swine flu, or H1N1, is declared a global pandemic.

June 25: The King of Pop, Michael Jackson, dies.

July 3: Sarah Palin resigns from the governorship of Alaska, mid-way through her first term.

August 7: On a Facebook post, Sarah Palin first uses the "death panel" myth to attack Obamacare, a plan for insurance-based health reform. The death panel statement is later named Politifact's "lie of the year."

August 8: Sonia Sotomayor, the first Hispanic woman to sit on the Supreme Court, takes her seat for the first time.

September 9: A Republican representative, Joe Wilson, shouts "You Lie!" at President Obama, during his speech before a joint session of Congress. No one ever shouted at Caucasian presidents during a State of the Union Speech.

October 9: President Obama wins the Nobel Peace Prize.

November 5: Thirteen people are murdered during a shooting spree at Fort Hood by Major Nidal Malik Hassan.

December 10: James Cameron's 3-D epic sci-fi film, *Avatar*, is released. It soon becomes the top-grossing film of all time. It holds that record for a decade.

December 25: Northwest Airlines Flight 253 is targeted by Al Qaeda, but the bomber, known alternatively as the Christmas Bomber and the Underwear Bomber, fails to succeed.

Antichrist * * * *

Critical Reception

“...an unrelenting orgy of graphic sex, violence and cynicism that also manages to be wildly pretentious.”—Christopher Kelly, *Dallas Morning News*, November 20, 2009.

“A philosophical musing on death and decay and the disastrously intertwined fates of married people, *Antichrist* is also a bipolar, gore-hound meta-slasher from the man behind *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark*, and *Dogville*. With its talking animatronic fox warning ‘Chaos reigns!’ and scenes of genital torture, *Antichrist* ups the ante in even the outrageous von Trier catalogue of shocks and will test even the hardest of art-house viewers.”—Felicia Feaster, *Charleston City Paper*: “With *Antichrist*, Lars von Trier takes an art-house stab at horror,” October 28, 2009.

“After the death of their son, She (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and He (Willem Dafoe) retreat to their country home to deal with their grief and continue with their work. For She, her work consists of a seemingly endless dissertation of Gynocide (the eradication of women due to misogyny) and for He it is using his profession as a psychiatrist to treat his wife. Written and directed by enfant terrible of the film world, Lars Von Trier the film takes its characters who are in the throes of grief and uncertainty and places them within a horror setting. The mood, tone and texture of the mise-en-scene harkens back to many classic horror films such as *Evil Dead* (1981), *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Don't Look Now* (1973). The film evolves from these classic horror settings and moods as the pair becomes increasingly destructive to each other and themselves in some of the film's most notorious scenes.

For all his prodding of the audience, Von Trier remains a detached auteur in these moments presenting them as matter-of-fact slices-of-life rather than the gut-wrenching shocks they would be in a more mainstream Torture Porn film. *Antichrist* has been derided as misogynistic film, however it is better viewed as a film about misogyny. Von Trier sets up a simple allegory involving She, He and the return to the home called Eden where things quickly go from bad to very worse. *Antichrist* is a far more interesting film when viewed through the lens of patriarchal destruction when She is not a victim but a perpetrator. Her life and tragic loss of her son led her to a place where the Christian patriarchal world began, when Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge in Eden. And through the film, the acts of He, what He believes in and the natural world around them, the audience can come to understand how the man-made world has failed her. Through her layered destruction of this filmic world a new, stranger and more unfamiliar world emerges at the end. It is a new form of resurrection.”—Alexandra West, author of *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Willem Dafoe (He); Charlotte Gainsbourg (She); Storm Acheche Sahlstrom (Nick).

CREW: IFC Films, Zentropa Entertainments, Slot Machine, Memfis Films, Trollhattan Film AB, Filmstiftung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Lucky red, Danmarks Radio, Art France Cinema, ZDF/Arte, Canal + present *Antichrist*. Casting: Victoria Beattie, Antoinette Boulat, Leo Davis. Production Designer: Kal Juliusson. Costume Designer: Frauke Firl. Music: Kristian Eidnes Andersen. Director of Photography: Anthony Dod Mantle. Film Editors: Asa Mossberg, Anders Refn. Producer: Meta Louise Foldager Sorenson. Executive Producers: Peter Garde, Peter Aalbæk Jensen. M.P.A.A. Rating: NR. Running time: 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A married couple, He (DaFoe) and She (Gainsbourg) mourn the loss their child after he falls to his death from an open window while they are making love. She retreats into medication and grief while he retreats into his work as a therapist. In an attempt to move on past their grief, they head out to a cabin in the woods, in a forest called Eden. There, He and She have a reckoning about the nature of man and woman and go to war with one another.

COMMENTARY: One quality of a great work of art is that it provokes. It consumes the mind and senses. A viewer or reader may return to the work of art over and over to suss out meaning; to seek clarity; to judge how it makes them, feel and what they think it attempts to convey. Not everyone is game for such a mind-bending exercise. Especially if the work of art in question happens to be a film. After all, it is much easier to reckon with a two-and-half-hour entertainment than a dark, brooding film about guilt, self-hatred, human nature, and psychoanalysis. Directed by Lars von Trier, *Antichrist* is just the sort of horror movie (and it *is* a horror movie) that will infuriate many and captivate others. The director made this 2009 film in the midst of a deep personal depression, but despite the film's brooding, lugubrious nature, *Antichrist* remains a vibrant and masterful meditation on nature. Human and otherwise. The primary argument against *Antichrist* is that it is "overtly misogynistic"; that the movie hates women.

When charges of misogyny are leveled, it is sometimes helpful to contextualize a filmmaker's choices and to look back at the director's overall career, rather than simply leap to the knee jerk conclusion that one particular work happens to be misogynistic. Lars von Trier is the Danish director who created in the late 1990s the informal "Golden Heart" trilogy. The films in this Dogma 95/ Goldenheart cycle included *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). The premise underlining each of these movies is that a sweet, put-upon woman—one who plays by the rules—is utterly destroyed by an uncaring, cruel society. Specifically, the "Goldenheart" is so good-hearted and sweet that she sacrifices all that she has—*all that she is*—for other people.

Dancer in the Dark—which was also a critique of the application of the death penalty in America—was perhaps the most heart-breaking of Von Trier's Goldenheart films. Starring Bjork, it involved a woman who viewed her sad, poverty-stricken life as a beautiful musical in the mold of *The Sound of Music* right up until the very moment she waltzed into the gallows and the State snapped her neck.

On the other hand, Von Trier is also known for putting his leading ladies through difficult paces. If you've seen Nicole Kidman in his controversial *Dogville*, you understand.

Yet being a difficult and perfectionist director doesn't make one a woman hater. It makes one a difficult and perfectionist director.

Antichrist tells the strange story of a middle-class married couple, known only as He (Dafoe) and She (Gainsbourg). In withholding their names from us, von Trier indicates that "He" and "She" are more than individual people. They are symbols of Male and Female nature. As the film opens in sumptuous, slow-motion photography and in black-and-white, the audience is treated to an extended, extremely passionate sex scene between He and She that includes close-up views of vaginal penetration. As He and She make love, steam rises luxuriously from the shower enclosure. Glittering water droplets fall all around their nude bodies, an atmospheric flourishing that adds to the atmosphere of stimulation. Outside the couple's comfortable home, it snows and snows—a winter-time fantasy brought to life. The sex itself looks extremely gratifying for both husband and wife, but a troubling object soon looms into the foreground of one composition set in their bedroom.

It is a baby monitor.

As the couple continues to make love, the baby monitor's sound levels, represented as ascending bars, spike dramatically. The couple's young son, Nick, is awake. His parents don't notice.

Or if they do notice, they don't stop their carnal pursuit.

As the sex grows more heated, the world seems to grow increasingly disordered. Items fall on the floor. An open bottle spills its contents chaotically. Von Trier then crosscuts between the continuing, focused sexual intercourse of the parents, and little Nick's innocent nocturnal exploration. The toddler slides out of his crib. He opens the baby gate. He strolls by his parents' bedroom door. Horrifyingly, he climbs to an open window to touch the ubiquitous falling snow just out of reach.

All this—*edited to an Aria by Handel*—culminates in a frenzy of sexual orgasm and tragic death. Passion has been sated. But responsibility has been neglected. Nick—the little boy—falls from the window to his death in agonizing, cruel slow-motion, replete with falling teddy bear at his side. After the child's death, the family's dirty laundry stops circling in the dryer in a separate shot. This is an image of domesticity shirked for passion.

After this terrible incident, He and She attempt to cope with their child's death. She blames herself, becomes dependent on mood-altering medication, and ends up in the hospital. She finds herself prone to panic attacks. He—a therapist—immediately makes his wife his pet project. Instead of coping with his own grief, He makes coping with her grief his only care; his only concern. Yet he is distant and arrogant and treats his wife like an experimental subject case. The doctors believe that She is experiencing an “atypical grief pattern,” but He knows better. He always knows better. Grief is normal; she just has to “work through it.”

One day, He asks his wife what She is afraid of most. Rather surprisingly, she tells him that she fears “the woods.” So together, they travel to the woods. “*Nature is Satan's Church*,” the movie informs us, and that warning soon proves accurate. But specifically, the couple travels to a pastoral corner of Earth named “Eden.” At their cabin there, the couple works out her grief, her panic attacks, her self-hatred. All by his timetable and modus operandi.

At the rural cabin, He also discovers evidence of his wife's academic thesis, which she mysteriously abandoned during her last trip to Eden. That academic work involved witches and “*gynocide*,” the mistreatment of women by men throughout history. Her notes also reveal a transformation in her thinking process: Her thoughts go from being extremely detailed and academic to looking like the lunatic scrawling of a schizophrenic, or someone possessed by the Devil. Then, He discovers photographs of their son Nick, from the boy's last summer trip to Eden (alone with his mother). In every single photograph the man unearths, the boy's shoes were placed on the wrong feet. And the official autopsy reveals that the boy's feet were slightly deformed, a result of his mother's strange, repetitive behavior.

Before long, the wife tells her husband that perhaps it is the Female's very nature to be evil, and that is why their son is dead. She indicates that all those men who burned and brutalized women as “*witches*” were only murdering “*evil*.” He categorically rejects this argument, stating that she—as an educated woman—should know better. That her research should tell her differently. Those women were brutalized. Those women (the witches) were destroyed by a male society that feared female strength and power. But his wife proves her point most dramatically. During sexual intercourse with her husband, she batters him in the penis—and this is seen on screen—with what appears to be a heavy log (though I have also seen it described as a brick in some reviews). The pain knocks the husband unconscious. And while he's out, his wife jerks him off until he ejaculates torrents of blood.

This is depicted on camera too. Nothing is hidden.

And that's just the beginning! The man's wife bolts a heavy, industrial pole (and thick metal grinding wheel) to one of his legs ... and throws away the wrench that could unbolt it. He tries to crawl away to safety, fearing for his life (but the “weight” of his wife drags him down). Later, in a harrowing scene, the wife in *Antichrist* mutilates her own genitals with a pair of scissors, an act also depicted on screen, in nauseating close-up, and then sets upon her husband with the scissors too. He fights back. Finally, after the last battle, He walks alone in the isolating forest of Eden. Mysteriously, an army of faceless women pass him by him on the hill, headed for some unknown destination.

So, what the hell is going on in *Antichrist*, and why do some people insist it is misogynist in intent?

Well, the movie is about one big idea: how people (women or men) believe and internalize the messages sent out by the culture, and the serious damage that those messages can inflict on a fragile ego. She has internalized all of the literature and history that she's read about witches, including the book, “*Gynocide*,” and decided that it must be true. *That women are evil*. She believes this—as the movie reveals in the final act—because she actually saw her son climb to the window before he fell and didn't stop him. She was in the midst of an orgasm, actually. She didn't save her own boy, so she must be evil, right? The woman's act of slicing off her own clitoris is important here. It is the act of cutting off the part of herself that is not acceptable to society; the part that wanted “sex” in one moment of passion.

And putting the boy's shoes on backwards? A passive-aggressive push-back against the male-dominated culture that tells her she must be a maternal caregiver first and an intellectual and a sexual being second and third.

Her husband believes he can talk to his wife rationally in terms of psychotherapy jargon and

platitudes, that he can deploy rationality and the intellect to talk her out of her very real grief, sadness, and blistering self-hatred. What he learns is that in Satan's Church (nature), "*chaos reigns*." Therapy has nothing to do with good or evil. Good and evil are more powerful forces than the constructs of man's science. And in acting out the part of "witch," down to the physical torturing of her husband, "She" accomplishes something else. She forces her cold fish husband to feel something too, a denied emotion.

Rage.

She rips the veneer of civilization from him. Now it is his nature, his ugly, violent "male" nature that is in play.

The therapist's wife forces him into a role from "Gynocide" indeed: the respectable man (the priest, the judge, the governor, the farmer) who puts aside all rationality and condemns a woman as a monster. When, in the film's last shot, Dafoe sees the hundreds of faceless women milling about in the woods, it is because he—the coldly rational therapist—has joined the ranks of the abusers. All these women, essentially, are the victims of his male nature.

Dafoe's character is not a bad or evil man, per se, but he is a dominating one. Throughout the film, He forces his wife to "play" therapist games on his timetable, in his fashion. He forces her to confront things she doesn't want to confront. He forces her to go where she does not want to go. He is demanding and relentless that she be "open." Yet in the end, his wife performs an experiment on him: burdening him with physical pain (and literally a physical weight), so as to see, finally, what he is made of. What she discovers, sadly, is that her husband is made of the same matter as the historical men in the academic books. When push comes to shove, he succumbs to rage. He commits murder. His hatred for her (and for all womankind, by extension) is the thing he has kept buried, and her experiments have exposed it.

Antichrist is filled with odd symbols. "Eden," of course, is a reference to the Biblical Garden of Eden. It is the place where He and She attempt to return to a state of innocence, free of guilt. But because nature is Satan's Church, there is no return to innocence; only a darkening of the situation. A giant life-less tree dominates the landscape, and it is the Biblical Tree of Knowledge, now an ugly, malevolent husk.

Throughout the film, He and She also encounter a variety of animals in the wild: A fox who speaks ("*Chaos Reigns*," he says...); a deer who carries a stillborn doe on its back, and a crow who eerily mimics the call of a dying child. In the end—when these three beggars meet—someone has to die, according to the wife's understanding of witchcraft lore. These animals represent, then, the woman's tacit philosophical acceptance of her "evil" sisterhood: so-called "pagan witches" who danced and prayed by moonlight in the forests; who controlled familiars (animals), and who—*their powers joined*—could make the sleet fall. Late in the film, She also makes it hail. And thus, one must wonder, if she can make it hail; *can she make it snow?* And if she can make it snow, did she create the snow on the night her son died?

The answers aren't easy to know here. All we can do is interpret the symbols and determine what the story of *Antichrist* means to us, based on our best reading of the clues. This author's viewpoint is that, like the Goldenheart trilogy by the same director, *Antichrist* is actually a rejection of misogyny. The film indicates that the woman—the once-obedient and "good" wife and mother—has internalized all the negative and hateful messages of a patriarchal culture and arrived at a place of self-hatred. Like the Goldenheart, she was good, and obligingly put her faith in the wrong place. That's what destroys her.

This woman enjoys sex (you'll notice the woman is always the sexual aggressor in this film) and yet she feels guilty about that, because our society by and large does not believe this is how a woman should behave. She also chafes under the role of "mother," because she is unable to continue her intellectual pursuits while acting as the child's caregiver. And also, her husband does not relate to her as an equal, but rather as a patient, a child needing to be corrected. She thus doesn't see herself in the role the culture demands of women: she is not happy as a Mom; she is not happy as a wife. She wants to feel passion and enjoys sex. In the lingo of the society, that makes her a whore or a slut, doesn't it?

The result is something terrible: after absorbing all those messages about the Evil in Female Nature, "She" decides to live up to them. She believes them. Her extreme guilt over her son's death

allows her no other trajectory. Similarly, her husband's denial takes him down the same path. He can only "blame" his wife for her mistakes and miscues, and this battle of the sexes ends in murder.

In whatever way one chooses to interpret *Antichrist*, it is a haunting film. Some of the image here are impossible to shake. The opening montage is a disturbing masterpiece, a mini film unto itself. And the shamanic dream walkabout through the forest by "She" is filled with gorgeous, portentous imagery that harks back to something primeval about the woods. Darkness has come early at that lonely bridge, in a frozen, misty woods.

Cross that bridge, and there is no turning back.

Antichrist is weird: an art-house movie that is, literally, gorier than *Saw* or any *Saw* sequel. Here, however, the violence is much more disturbing because it all occurs within the framework of the marital relationship; in the very place where love should reign.

What is there to fear in the woods of Eden? As the wife says, "*Can't I just be afraid without a definite object?*"

Antichrist will make you afraid. And the definite object to be afraid of is *us*.

Or as is scrawled by "He" on his wife's pyramid of fear: "Me."

*Autopsy (DTV) * * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jessica Lowndes (Emily); Ross Kohn (Bobby); Ross McCall (Jude); Arkady Golubovich (Dmitry); Robert LaSardo (Scott); Michael Bowen (Travis); Robert Patrick (Dr. Benway); Jenette Goldstein (Nurse Marian); Elijah Hardy (Gregory); Tatyana Kanavka (Gretchen); Eric F. Adams (Officer Jacobs).

CREW: After Dark Films, Parallel Zide Studios, Lion Shares Productions, in association with Seven Arts Pictures and Voodoo Pictures presents *Autopsy*. Casting: Melissa Skoff. Production Designers: Dorian Vernacchio, Deborah Raymond. Costume Designer: Amanda Friedliend. Special Make-up Effects: Gary J. Tunnicliffe. Music: Joseph Bishar. Director of Photography: Anthony B. Richmond. Film Editor: Andrew Cohen. Producers: Bruce P. McNall, Stephen C. Markoff. Executive Producers: Olga Mirimskaya, Raymond J. Markovich, Harmon Kaslow, Daniel Cassalino, John Martin, Baron Davies. Written by: Jace Anderson, Adam Gierasch, and E.L. Katz. Directed by: Adam Gieresch. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After partying at Mardi Gras, a group of young adults, including the couple Emily (Lowndes) and Bobby (Kohn), travel State Route 53 in Louisiana and are in a terrible car accident. They hit a man in the road, and take the ambulance to out-of-the-way Mercy Hospital, which is "*on a skeleton crew ever since*" Hurricane Katrina hit a few years earlier. There, Emily (Lowndes) worries about her injured boyfriend, Bobby (Kohn), especially because his attending physician, Benway (Patrick) doesn't seem quite right. Soon, her friends start disappearing, and Emily comes to realize that the hospital is not what it appears to be.

COMMENTARY: There are two intriguing aspects of *Autopsy*, a low-budget and mostly predictable and run-of-the-mill horror movie. The first is its post-Katrina milieu and setting in Louisiana. Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana as a Category 3 Storm on August 29, 2005, bringing with it 8 to 10 inches of rain across the eastern region of the state. Two storm surges drowned many of the state's parishes, and the hurricane breached New Orleans' levee system. *Autopsy's* central setting, Mercy Hospital, is a location where insane people have taken over the facility, basically, and have been allowed to operate because there is no oversight or help nearby. This situation reflects that The Bush Administration and local government, were heavily criticized for failing to anticipate the hurricane damage, or respond in a timely fashion to it. Here, a 9/11 operator reveals to the film's final girl, Emily,

that "Mercy has been closed for three years." In other words, it has to be operating under the radar and without authority because the state and localities have still not recovered from the hurricane.

Heckuva job!

The second memorable aspect of the film is its absolutely committed grand guignol approach to gore. For example, the *coup de grace* is a grotesque sequence near film's end in which Emily discovers her boyfriend's body suspended from the ceiling, his organs removed. He is kept alive artificially, and conscious too, by the mad Dr. Benway in an attempt to keep his own wife alive. The camera swirls around the incredible and disgusting surgical set-up in a suitably stylish fashion. Another sickening sequence showcases a surgery conducted while the patient is still conscious, and his stomach is removed. Another scene sees a victim's fingerprints sanded off.

And, then, of course, there's the scene in which Dr. Benway drinks the spinal fluid of one of his victims.

In short, *Autopsy* is never afraid to double down on the doctor's insane behavior.

Autopsy features genre icons Robert Patrick and Jenette Goldstein, and that's to the good, but it is Jessica Lowndes who grounds the film with her solid, sympathetic performance as Emily. To its detriment, the film spends an unfortunate amount of its running time with characters wandering hospital hallways, and some of the movie's touches seem tonally mismatched. Patrick is big and brassy as the disturbed Benway, but his over-the-top performance, while fitting in well with the approach to gore, clashes with the mostly realistic tenor of the film, and Lowndes's grounded portrayal of the lead character. *Autopsy* also fails the smell test early on, by featuring the most suspicious looking EMTs ever put to film. They are so two-dimensional and threatening that one immediately questions the main characters for going with them to the hospital.

Mad surgeons are a staple of modern horror films such as *Scream and Scream Again* (1970), *Body Parts* (1991), and even *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* (2008), and in this case, Benway's purpose is to save his sick wife, utilizing hospital patients as fodder. But *Autopsy* doesn't really add much to this genre chestnut. In a way, *Autopsy* is a road trip gone awry picture, but instead of running up against cannibals, in-bred maniacs or the like, the young adults here find an oasis of madness in a place destroyed by nature and governmental neglect. In the 2000s alone, there are probably a half-dozen better road-trip gone wrong movies, including *Joy Ride* (2001), *Wrong Turn* (2003), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Wolf Creek* (2005), and *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), so little about *Autopsy* feels fresh or special, besides the 2000s post-Katrina setting, and the amazing gore sequences.

In the right set of circumstances, this may be just enough to entertain a stalwart horror fan on a slow night.

*Best Worst Movie (DTV) * * **

Cast & Crew

CAST: George Hardy (Self); Lily Hardy (Self); Pita Ray (Self); Micki Knox (Self); Tommy Bice (Self); Lila Graves (Self); Laura Gullledge (Self); Merry Hardy (Self); Barbara H. Young (Self); Mary Ann Hardy (Self); Wade Jones (Self); Michael Paul Stephenson (Self); Connie Young (Self).

CREW: Area 23A, Abramorama, and Magic Stone Productions presents *Best Worst Movie*. Bobby Tahouri. Director of Photography: Katie Graham. Film Editors: Katie Graham, Andrew Matthews. Producers: Brad and Jim Klopman, Lindsay Stephenson, Michael Paul Stephenson. Executive Producers: Dana Ferniany, Will Ferniany, Ace Goerig, Mary Francis Groom, Bill Hardy, Mary Hardy, Alan Hunter, Hugh Hunter, Jim Kennemer, Jim McKeon, Robin Mobley, Gary Rowles. Written and Directed by: Michael Paul Stephenson. M.P.A.A. Rating: N.A. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The cast and crew reminisce about being *Troll 2*, widely believed to be the worst movie ever made, and also contend with the (brief) fame their participation in that project has granted them on the horror convention circuit.

COMMENTARY: Fame can be a cruel master. Fame shows up when and where it wants to, and always on its own terms. People will do almost anything to make fame stick around. But when fame is finished with you, it just crawls back into the woodwork and finds another favorite daughter or son. Case in point: *Troll 2* (1990): a ridiculous yet strangely earnest horror movie that has captured the affection and attention of bad movie lovers everywhere, even 30 long years after its debut.

Starting in approximately 2006, *Troll 2* and its cast got the fifteen minutes of fame they had been denied since the film's inauspicious premiere in the Bush I era. In particular, Alabama dentist George Hardy—who plays the imperiled family's patriarch in the film—rode a crest of cult popularity for a time. The downside of this newfound celebrity, however, involves two factors. First, the fact that the duration of “15 minutes of fame” has a built-in-expiration date. And secondly, the exact nature of *Troll 2*'s fame. Specifically, *Troll 2* has become many film fans' favorite candidate for the “worst movie ever made.”

On a sympathetic note, that is a really a patently unfair assessment. It's much more accurate to suggest that *Troll 2* is simply one of the weirdest, most oddball movies ever made. The movie is set in the town of Nilbog (Goblin spelled backwards), and—as the screenwriter attests to in *Best Worst Movie*—it serves as some kind of weird comment on assertive, over-the-top vegetarianism.

The quirky brilliance—or perhaps, terrible badness—of *Troll 2* arises from the specifics of its “lost in translation” behind-the-scenes equation. In particular, the film stars Americans, but was produced, written, shot and directed by overly confident and exuberant Italians. There's some kind of critical creative disconnect there, and in that disconnect, unintended humor emerges. *Best Worst Movie* is an extremely compelling, surprisingly touching documentary chronicling the rise and fall, and subsequent rise and fall again of *Troll 2*. The film was made by Michael Paul Stephenson, who starred in *Troll 2* back in 1990 when he was just ten years old.

Stephenson is the audience's steady guide here, and he is not out to hurt or demean anyone. He's not trying to be an arbiter, impartial or otherwise. He's merely trying to contextualize this personal experience he had when he was a kid; making this crazy, infamous horror film. He wants to understand and process that experience better, and that's a good motif for the audience to carry through the film's duration. Because the viewer would like to understand that experience too.

So, Stephenson's ubiquitous cameras follow *Troll 2*'s lead actor, affable George Hardy, as he first tastes fame and notoriety, and then sees it slip away as the cultists inevitably move on to the next big thing. George is a happy go-lucky, extremely extroverted fellow, and you can see that it deeply hurts when the newfound attention dissipates.

Look, there's one of the stars of *Nightmare on Elm Street 4*! And hey, isn't that director Neil Marshall over there?

Underneath the surface trappings—the green goo, the burlap sacks and the backwards spellings of the 1990 film—*Best Worst Movie* is really an exploration of fame, and how capricious celebrity can seem. Again, the film is not cruel about this idea; only observant.

For instance, George Hardy is all about the love so long as *Troll 2* is the center of attention. He patiently and enthusiastically repeats his famous line reading, about “pissing on hospitality,” always to a good laugh. But then, at a horror movie convention, George experiences his first Spinal Tap moment where no one visits his table.

Not a soul.

Then, all the sudden, by George's way of thinking, the horror genre is “sick.” Everyone associated with horror has “gingivitis” according to this very successful dentist. *These people have no taste*. What is this really about?

It hurts to feel rejected. George lashes out and tries to diminish the people whose approbation he sought, and for a time, received. Again, if you are a blogger, an actor, or a moviemaker, you recognize

this feeling and should be sensitive to it. By the end of the film, George also overcomes his unpleasant stage of the process and seems at peace with himself and the *Troll 2* experience. And it's nice to see that, at the end, there is redemption and acceptance.

Troll 2 director Claudio Fragasso is also a major player in the film. At times he gets downright hostile with his actors and his audiences over the idea of *Troll 2* being the “worst movie ever made.” He’s not at all civil on this topic, but *God bless him* ... it’s his movie, and unlike the actors (as he accurately points out), he can’t easily distance himself from the “art” he created. This movie is *his child*; and no one likes to see a child treated poorly. Of course, he’s going to defend *Troll 2*, and throughout the documentary, the audience sees him search for a basis to do just that. Fragasso’s efforts in this regard are actually impressive, if not entirely persuasive.

Why is the movie famous? Well, “*it means I’ve made an impression*,” he suggests. Or, he notes, there’s not really that much difference between being loved for making the worst movie ever or the best movie ever ... *is there?*

The more I think about that one, the more I think he could be right in that particular regard.

In yet another sense, *Best Worst Movie* also concerns horror fandom in general, and how open-hearted it truly is. The laughter of the crowds in *Troll 2* is not cruel. Nobody in any audience is disrespectful to the actors or the behind-the-scenes personnel of the film. In fact, there’s this groundswell of love and appreciation for these people who—*intentionally or not*—made a film that has become a personal favorite to many. The horror fans here are not capricious by design, either. They are simply possessing of wide interest. You can’t live on a diet of *Troll 2*, alone. The world is big enough so that we can all enjoy George Hardy, Neil Marshall and the stars of *Nightmare on Elm Street IV*, isn’t it? For horror fans—and this is why I consider them such an accepting bunch, by and large—appreciation isn’t always only about quality. Sometimes appreciation is about nostalgia and childhood. Sometimes it is about a great scene in a bad movie that nonetheless inspires the imagination. Sometimes it’s just about recognizing *the heart* with which a talent made a movie; that “*A for Effort*” syndrome I’ve written about before.

In toto, *Best Worst Movie* is extremely emotional. Over the years this author made no-budget movies and web series too (with titles like *The House Between* [2007–2009] and *Volumes of Blood* [2014]) and written books that some people have really not liked or appreciated.

I know how that “dislike” can feel to the creator: *like a punch to the gut*.

I admire Michael Stephenson for embracing his experience with *Troll 2*—the good and the bad—and putting it before the entire world to see. Because of his openness and sense of honesty, at the end of *Best Worst Movie* there’s a feeling of overwhelming catharsis. It’s a feeling that despite the moniker “worst movie ever made,” the *Troll 2* experience was kind of a magical, one-in-a-million thing.

And the world is so much richer, and better off, for having that weird, weird movie around.

*Blood Creek (DTV) * * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Henry Cavill (Evan Marshall); Dominic Purcell (Victor Marshall); Emma Booth (Liese Wollner); Michael Fassbender (Richard Wirth); Rainier Winklevoss (Otto Wollner); Laszlo Matray (Karl Wollner); Joy McBrinn (Mrs. Wollner); Shea Wigham (Luke Benny); Tony Barger (Larry); Gerard McSorley (Mr. Marshall); Vlad Voda (Vic Jr.); Albert Gherasim (Owen); Lynn Collins (Barb); Matthew Benson (Farmer’s Market Owner).

CREW: Universal Studios, Lion’s Gate and Gold Circle Films presents *Blood Creek*. Casting: Carl Proctor. Production Designer: Christin Niculescu. Costume Designer: Christopher Peterson. Special Effects: Effects Associates, Patrick Tatopoulos Design, Riot, Tatopoulos Studios. Music: David Buckley. Film Editor: Mark Stevens. Producers: Paul Brooks, Tom Lassally, Robyn Meisinger. Executive Producers: Scott Niemeyer, Eli Richbourg, Norm Waitt. Written by: David Kajganich. Directed by: Joel Schumacher. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1936, the Wollners, a family of German immigrants and farmers in West Virginia, unexpectedly host Nazi historian Wirth (Fassbender) as he searches for occult Viking artifacts on their property. In 2009, exhausted EMT Evan (Cavill) searches for his missing brother, Victor (Marshall), a veteran of the War on Terror, during the Great Recession. Evan's search takes him to the Wollner farm, where, strangely, no time seems to have passed for the denizens there since the days of World War II. Worse, Wirth is still there, now a twisted, hideous monster seeking to manipulate dark occult powers to his own perverse ends.

COMMENTARY: *Blood Creek* is one strange and over-the-top movie. It is also one brimming with inventive ideas, and some marvelously harrowing and violent moments. By the same token, the film throws so much at the wall that at times it doesn't always hang together as much as one might prefer. And then, of course, there are the moments that are so over-the-top that they transmit as high camp.

The film involves a diabolical Nazi historian, a kind of Third Reich Indiana Jones, who searches for runes that can grant him immortality. He eventually achieves that immortality, grows a third eye, and starts feeding on human blood. He also, incidentally, freezes a family of German immigrants in a bubble of time, so that they don't age at all between the years 1936 and 2009. This is not a good thing, as the family testifies. The family's adolescent daughter reports to Evan: "*Time doesn't touch us. I've been 17 longer than you've been alive.*" It's a strangely haunting revelation that suggests the hellish nature of this evil "*immortality.*" The family doesn't grow, doesn't change, doesn't escape. For it, the time is always 1936, and Hitler is always rising. Their host, similarly, is a terrible monster.

This odd *Twilight Zone* premise is coupled with a very frank and straight-forward depiction of red state America circa 2008–2009. This is America of the Great Recession, as the Iraq War continues, and a character notes "*we're all just living on hope and faith.*" That hope is what Barack Obama channeled to victory in 2008, the belief that even with banks collapsing, soldiers dying and the country in shambles, there was still the opportunity to turn things around. But the America here is depicted in terms of trailer parks, poverty, and Old Glory. As a presidential candidate, Obama got in some trouble for noting that many Americans cling to their guns and Bibles. He was talking about the culture depicted here.

There's a lot to unpack in this setting of Recession. Is 2009 America a corollary for 1936 Germany? Will a down and out people, mired in war and economic ruin turn to authoritarianism and fascism? That's one possible meaning of the conjunction between these dates and worlds. Or, is 2009 a contrast to 1936, with the moral arc bending towards justice, as Obama once noted? The family trapped in time, in a bubble of evil, is in a much worse state than Evan and Victor are. It, alas, no longer has even faith and hope to sustain it.

Blood Creek is incredibly violent, and graphic. At one point, a character has to inject himself with the rabies vaccine, after being bitten by a dog. At other times, characters take shotgun blasts at point blank range. There are scenes of torture and abuse, and more. Then, the film ends with a promise that the Fassbender's visitor was not alone, that Himmler sent eight other Nazis to find more occult artifacts and gain more supernatural powers. It's a set up for a sequel that never came.

Blood Creek is a bit schlocky at times, but the campiness is outweighed by the scenes with the frozen farm family, and the bond between Evan and Victor. It's not a great film, but certainly Cavill and Fassbender went on to become stars in the next decade and it's a treat to see them carving out a path in a campy, bloody, Nazi/supernatural horror movie.

*Boogeyman 3 (DTV) * **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Erin Cahill (Sarah); Chuck Hittinger (David); Mimi Michaels (Lindsey); Matty Rippy (Kane); Nikki

Sanderson (Audrey); WB Alexander (Lukas); Elyes Gabel (Ben); George Maguire (Jeremy); Jayne Wisener (Amy); Kate Maberly (Jennifer); Todd Jensen (Security Officer); Niky Sotirov and Vladimir Yosifov (Boogeyman). Richie Mantelley (Brandon); Galine Talkington (Katie).

CREW: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, Stage 6, and Ghost House Pictures present *Boogeyman 3*. Casting: Sunday Boling, Meg Morman. Production Designer: Borislav Michailovski. Costume Designer: Maria Mladenova. Special Effects: Robert Kurtzman's Creature Crew, E3 Media. Music: Joseph LoDuca. Director of Photography: Lorenzo Senatore. Film Editor: John Quinn. Producer: Andrew Pfeffer. Executive Producer: J.R. Young. Based on characters created by: Eric Kripke. Written by: Brian Sieve. Directed by: Gary Jones. M.P.A.A. Rating: Unrated. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Audrey (Sanderson), the daughter of the late Dr. Allen, discovers his journal detailing the Boogeyman murders of Hillbridge Clinic. Soon, she is haunted by the Boogeyman herself. Her roommate at Wolfbridge University in North California, Sarah (Cahill), learns of her story, and her father's story. After the Boogeyman kills Audrey and makes it look like a suicide, Sarah researches further, and begins to believe the story. She begins to talk about the Boogeyman on her college radio talk show, which creates an aura of panic at the school. Sarah's friends don't believe her ravings about the monster, however, because Sarah is dealing with a double trauma: the death of Audrey, and the death of her own mother.

COMMENTARY: This not entirely lifeless sequel to *Boogeyman 2* re-imagines the titular monster as a rubber-reality supernatural slasher, not exactly the physical slasher of the previous entry. In an intriguing turn of events, the movie establishes that the Boogeyman gains strength from the belief his victims have in him. So like Freddy Krueger, he draws power from the fear, anxiety of his would-be victims. It's a good notion to build a horror movie around (see: *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* [1994]), but the primary problem with *Boogeyman 3* is that once it defines its parameters, its rules, it doesn't stick to them. This is an especially vexing problem for rubber reality horror films. If the villain obeys no rules, and can do anything, then he or she is unstoppable, and the film loses much of its drive.

Exhibit A: The movie establishes the manner in which the Boogeyman gets to his victims. You must believe, even for a second, in the possibility that he is real. If you have any doubt that he is real, he can't get you. After establishing this rule, *Boogeyman 3* repeatedly violates it. Lucas (Alexander) is a victim, and he doesn't believe in the boogeyman, at least not the audience is made aware of. And then Jeremy (Maguire) is also killed by the boogeyman. It is clear he doesn't believe in him at all, but again, gets murdered by him.

Finally, the moment that Dr. Kane (Rippy) starts to believe in the Boogeyman, he is instantaneously butchered. Since Lucas and Jeremy didn't have to believe, why stress the point of belief with Dr. Kane? How does the Boogeyman get to the non-believers? And if he can get to the non-believers, why can't he get to any character in the film, at any time?

Also, it is unclear in the film how the Boogeyman operates in terms of our consensus reality. He rewrites reality several times so that physical evidence of a crime, such as blood on the dorm walls, is sometimes present, and sometimes not. How does this incredible power work, precisely? He's a work of fiction, given life by belief, and he can rewrite reality to change any matter he pleases?

Although *Boogeyman 3* grinds on along fairly predictable and familiar rubber reality lines, its intriguing to think of the 2000s real life, boogeyman, Osama Bin Laden, while watching the film. Before the Obama Administration tracked him down and took him out in 2011, Bin Laden was a "story" to frighten Americans. Think about it: he appeared out of nowhere, at least to mainstream Americans, led a devastating attack on the people and country, and then, just as promptly vanished into thin air. After 9/11 he became almost a campfire story, a monster who attacked the country and yet is "still out there." He was thus a representation of a Boogeyman character, which this movie describes as a "physical manifestation of our darkest fears." Every culture of fear needs a Boogeyman to dread, and for the decade this book covers, it was certainly Bin Laden. This idea is connected to the film in a unique way. At one

point, Sarah believes there is going to be a mass attack on the dorm, the equivalent of a terrorist attack. She believes she is the only one who can prevent it. But to connect the Boogeyman to a large-scale massacre naturally brings up thoughts of Bin Laden, and the War on Terror Age.

There's a lot of high-minded thinking going on in this film about how legends live and die based on social relevancy and it's good to see a direct-to-video horror franchise contemplating cerebral ideas like that. Were the execution of *Boogeyman 3* a bit more consistent and well-thought out, it would be a far more rewarding viewing experience.

Cabin Fever 2: Spring Break (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Rider Strong (Paul); Noah Segan (John); Alexi Wasser (Cassie); Rusty Kelley (Alex); Marc Senter (Marc); Giuseppe Andrews (Deputy Winston); Mark Borchardt (Herman); Michael Bowen (Principal Sinclair); Judah Friedlander (Toby); Larry Fessenden (Bill the Water Truck Driver); Amanda Jelks (Frederica); Thomas Blake, Jr. (Rick); Angela Oberer (Ms. Hawker); Taylor Kowalski (Darryl); Alexander Isaiah Smith (Dane).

CREW: Lion's Gate Films, Tonic Films, Morning Star Films, Carr Miller Entertainment, Taurus Studios, Wrigman productions present in association with Aloe Entertainment and Proud Mary Entertainment, *Cabin Fever 2: Spring Break*. Casting: Mitzi Corrigan, Lisa Fields. Production Designer: Tim Grimes. Costume Designer: Leigh Leverett. Special Effects: Media Factory, Quantum Creation FX. Music: Ryan Shore. Director of Photography: Eliot Rickett. Film Editor: Janice Hampton. Producers: Patrick Durham, Lauren Moews, Jonathan Sachar. Executive Producers: Susan Jackson, Jerry Kroll, Corey Large. Story by: Ti West and Randy Pearlstein. Written by: Joshua Malkin. Directed by: Ti West. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Paul (Strong), a survivor of an outbreak of flesh-eating virus, is killed on the highway by a school bus. Meanwhile, the "*Down Home Water Company*" takes water from the reservoir where the contaminating agent remains. The company bottles the infected water, and delivers it to a nearby high school, where teens planning for the prom begin to drink it. Soon everyone is sickened by the contaminated drink and the flesh-eating virus causes death on a catastrophic scale.

COMMENTARY: *Cabin Fever 2* certainly does not represent Ti West's best film work, and nor is this sequel as powerful a film as Eli Roth's original *Cabin Fever*. Those facts duly noted, this is still a disgusting, funny, and effectively made horror film. In fact, one line of dialogue in the movie perfectly captures the whole affair. One student says of another student (a nerd) that he is "*living proof that you can be smart and stupid at the same time.*"

Cabin Fever 2 is, indeed, smart and stupid at the same time.

It wallows in buckets of disgusting gore, and relishes the audience's fear of germs, and sickness. One scene is so over-the-top and even panic-inducing so as to be unforgettable. A disenfranchised high school janitor who is (unknowingly) infected with the Down Home Water goes to the unguarded punch bowl that will soon be consumed at the senior prom. While no one is looking, he urinates into the bowl. The bowl quickly fills with his bloody urine, and it all disappears into the punch. A few scenes later, all the high school students at the dance are downing the contaminated punch by the cupful.

Gross.

Another similarly stomach-turning scene involves an overweight girl and a young man skinny dipping in the swimming pool and having sex. But they are both infected, and the sex gets messy fast.

Outside of the intentionally cartoon-like amounts of gore, which is certainly not for the faint of heart, *Cabin Fever 2* possesses a politically incorrect spirit. There's a student who gives birth at the prom in the school bathroom, and the moment is certainly in bad taste given that such things actually do

happen in America. And then there's the rampant fat shaming. Similarly, a gay principal is made the butt of nasty jokes, solely because he is gay. These moments are all designed to be transgressive, and offensive, and they are. It is probably fair to state that this film could not be made in the environment of the 2020s, but the movie throws caution—and good taste—to the wind.

But *Cabin Fever 2: Spring Fever* can't always decide how it wants to proceed. It vacillates between moods on a whim, which makes it tough to get a handle on, as a work of art. There's the over-the-top gore, the gay and fat jokes, and even a scene in which a lusty female student with braces—and herpes on her lips—performs oral sex on a male student. Then, amidst all the envelope-pushing depravity and offense, moments of pure, raw honesty occur. There is a moment, outside the school in the parking lot, where a main character, John (Segan), tells Cassie (Wasser), the girl he is in love with, precisely why she is the best person at the school. He then admonishes her for dating a romantic rival, the absolute worst person at the school. There is a truth and power in this scene that makes both characters seem real and likable. Those qualities are important as the film takes them to some unhappy, and even tragic places. As scattershot and nasty as the film often is, John and Cassie, and their relationship, anchors the movie in some humanity.

Replete with weird touches, such as book-end animated sequences that detail the spread of the contaminated water, *Cabin Fever 2: Spring Break* is a film that nearly works. Its taboo-busting grotesqueries, both in terms of gore and its humor, suggest a kind of rampant fearlessness on the part of the filmmakers that, perhaps, could have been more consistently applied. This is a film whose sole desire and wish is to thoroughly shock and disgust its audience.

On those grounds, it is largely successful.

Carriers (DTV) * * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Lou Taylor Pucci (Danny); Chris Pine (Brian); Piper Perabo (Bobby); Emily Van Camp (Kate); Christopher Meloni (Frank); Kiernan Shipka (Jodie); Mark Moses (Doctor); Josh Berry, Tim Janis, Dale Malley (Survivalists); Ron McClary (Voice of Preacher); LeAnne Lynch (Rose); Dylan Kenin (Tom).

CREW: Paramount Vantage, and Likely Story, in association with This is That presents *Carriers*. Casting: Jeanne McCarthy. Production Designer: Clark Hunter. Costume Designer: Jill Newell. Music: Peter Nashel. Special Effects: Brainstorm Digital, Edgeworx. Director of Photography: Benoit Debie. Film Editor: Craig McKay. Producers: Ray Angelic, Anthony Bregman. Written and Directed by: Alex and David Pastor. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Brothers Brian (Pine) and Danny (Pucci) make their way across America's back roads following a deadly pandemic. Their destination is Turtle Beach in the Gulf of Mexico, where they hope to settle. Traveling with the duo is Brian's girlfriend, Bobby (Perabo), and a young woman rescued from a McMansion, Kate (Van Camp). The travelers soon encounter a desperate man, Frank (Meloni), and his eight-year-old daughter, Jodie (Shipka), who is sick. Frank tells the survivors of a nearby CDC center which may possess a vaccine, but in this new world order, nobody trusts anybody, and death is around every corner.

COMMENTARY: *Carriers* is one of the bleakest and most emotionally wrenching end-of-the-world thrillers since the age of *The Day After* (1983), *Testament* (1983) or *Threads* (1984). Those films all arose out of the Cold War and the pervasive fear of a nuclear winter during the Age of Ronald Reagan, a politician who insisted, wrongly, that a submarine's nuclear missiles could be recalled after launch, and

famously joked about bombing Russia in “five minutes” on an open mic. In keeping with the 21st century, however, and with the rise of the H1N1 flu, *Carriers* updates the specifics of the global apocalypse.

This time, it is a terrible pandemic that has wiped out most of the world's population. Billions have died, gasoline is scarce, the Federal government is absent, and medical science has all but surrendered. The uninfected are left to carry on in a kind of moral abyss. At one point during the film, the audience sees a normal suburban town in middle-western America, or what's left of it. A truck marked “Biohazard” and packed with human remains is abandoned on the side of the road, garbage is strewn everywhere across the avenue as infrastructure fails, and homes have been spray-marked in code by authorities, just like the nation saw in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

It's a grim portrait of collapse. And one that has grown more powerful, and relevant, in the days of COVID-19.

Carriers stars Chris Pine (*Star Trek* [2009]) as Brian and Lou Taylor Pucci as his brother, Danny. These siblings are a study in opposites. Brian is tough, brutal and adheres mercilessly to a set of rules. These rules are: avoid the infected at all costs, disinfect anything that was touched by the infected, and most importantly, “*the sick are already dead*.”

Danny, who is nicknamed “*Ivy League*” by Brian is a well-meaning intellectual without a cutthroat bone in his body. He is Brian's conscience when needs be, but he also hides behind Brian, who does the dirty work for his little brother.

Carriers involves the moral choices that these brothers forge in the face of apocalypses both biological and personal. Early on, the film depicts a quick encounter with a murderous redneck, who shoots down an Asian-American. The murderer ties a sign around the corpse's neck that reads “*Chinks Brought It*,” and it is horrifying to calculate the prescience of this moment. In the age of COVID-19, we have all heard President Trump refer to the “Chinese Flu” (or “Kung Flu,”) and his supporters parrot the same anti-China rhetoric. In *Carriers*, rednecks and their nativist beliefs have survived the apocalypse. They're well-armed (The 2nd Amendment Lives!), drive their pick-up trucks on patrol, and have graduated to cold-blooded murder.

But *Carriers* isn't a movie about politics; it is a movie about moral choices. Simply put, the “rules” that Brian so assiduously lives by are not quite as intractable when applied to those he loves, or even to himself. It's easy to say “*the sick are already dead*” when your lover is healthy, or you are healthy. But when those you love are sick, clarity is gone. As humans, we cling irrationally to things like hope.

The early portion of *Carriers* belongs to Meloni, who delivers a raw, understated and unforgettable performance. Frank does everything he can to save his sick little girl, and, in the end, is left with no options. He deals with his daughter's mortality in a way that will break your heart; by being simply—*until the bitter end*—“Daddy” to his child. There's a shot here that will remain in your psyche long after the film has ended: Frank walking in foreground, Jodie in his arms, while Brian, Danny and the girls drive away in abject cowardice in the background, abandoning the man and his child. The car peels out in the distance, and Frank is fully aware of it, but he *focuses, laser-like*, on the child in his arms, never looking back, never breaking composure. Instead, he asks Jodie to sing a particular song that he likes; as if they are the only two people in the entire world. She starts to sing it in that little, innocent, childish voice, and that's the last seen of Frank and Jodie in the film.

But if you are a parent, trust me, you'll return to that image in your slumber.

If the early part of *Carriers* belongs to Meloni, then the last act certainly belongs to Chris Pine, who demonstrates here (as he did in *Star Trek*) that he is an actor of interesting and unusual depth. At first, his Brian is arrogant and cruel, but as the movie goes on, another side of the character is revealed. He is the one who makes hard decision after hard decision for his brother. In fact, Brian's final, irreversible, aggressive decision may play to some in the audience as selfish and desperate, but perhaps it is the opposite. It's his final gift to his brother; the last bit of toughening-up he can give to a kid who is unequipped to live in this sad new world. Again, *Carriers* asks the audience to consider the moral dimensions of the actions undertaken by Brian, Danny, Bobby and Kate. At one point, Bobby commits an absolutely immoral act, but does so after trying to save Jodie's life. Still, she hides the fact that she

may be contaminated, and in this particular world, that's absolutely tantamount to committing murder. She jeopardizes everybody by clinging to irrational beliefs about the disease, and about her own mortality.

The audience also encounters that post-apocalyptic MAGA-in-training, a nativist still eager to kill someone who looks different, and to place blame, despite the fact that blame, at this point, is certainly immaterial. In one town, Brian and his group also encounter a doctor from the CDC, one who makes an absolutely brutal-seeming choice regarding the dying children under his care. But even here, the film is honest. "*Sometimes choosing life is just choosing a more painful form of death,*" he tells Frank. Not a happy message, but not an untrue one, either. In another harrowing scene, two male survivors decide to abduct the girls (Bobby and Kate) for their own personal "use," but do so as easily as Brian acquires gasoline from passing travelers. In this world, people are simply another resource to be exploited.

Carriers evidences some visual acumen, too. The movie opens with shaky home movies of Danny and Brian as youngsters. They play at Turtle Beach, feeding seagulls and running in the surf. The camera pans up to the sky and then the film transitions literally, *into an upside-down view* of the world as it is now, as topsy-turvy a place as is imaginable. The image itself tells the viewer how wrong things have become in this world of pandemic.

Directors Alex and David Pastor also have an eye for expressing irony. At an abandoned high school, a classroom has been converted into an emergency medical ward, but all the trappings of the classroom are still there. Namely, a banner over the chalkboard which reads "*Career Day: Your Future Depends on It.*"

In this new world, the banner is absolutely meaningless, and worse, a painful reminder of what has been lost.

Perhaps what remains most compelling about *Carriers* is that it is entirely devoid of Hollywood bullshit. There's no last act miracle for these characters; there's no sudden reversal of fortune for the world; there's no mock heroics to save the day. When beloved characters—and children—get the disease, they die. The film never succumbs to schmaltz or sentimentality. Instead, it ends with a simple and devastating admission: that Danny, sans Brian, will now spend the remainder of his days "*alone.*" There's nothing to look forward to anymore.

In *Carriers*, the world is really falling apart a piece at a time, leaving only places like Turtle Beach, but no people there to comment on them. The silence in and of itself is devastating. Many apocalypse movies (zombie apocalypse movies particularly) are noisy, busy and crowded, so that audiences don't think about what's lost; instead they just think about staying ahead of the drooling hordes.

Carriers looks into the abyss, and there are no distractions from the view.

Carriers isn't spectacular. But it is elegiac. "*It's a beautiful day,*" says Bobby (paraphrased), "*but it shouldn't be a beautiful day.*" Above all, *Carriers* makes the viewer wonder how she or he would behave in such a situation. *As a Father. As a brother. As a daughter. As a Mom. As a human being.*

Would you cling to your sense of morality in a crisis, or just act—to utilize the movie's most dynamic visual metaphor—as a vicious dog feeding off the corpses of the dead? In the 2020s, in the age of COVID-19, answering such questions is really a matter of life and death for everyone breathing air on planet Earth.

*The Children (DTV) * * ½*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Eva Birthistle (Elaine); Stephen Campbell Moore (Jonah); Jeremy Sheffield (Robbie); Rachel Shelley (Chloe); Hannah Tointon (Casey); Rafiella Bates (Leah); Jake Hathaway (Nicky).

CREW: Lionsgate, Ghosthouse Underground, Vertigo Films and Protagonist Pictures present a Tom Shankland film, *The Children*. Casting: Gary Davy, Amanda Tabak. Production Designer: Suzie Davie. Costume

Designer: Andrew Cox. Music: Stephen Hilton. Director of Photography: Nanu Segel. Film Editor: Tim Murrell. Producers: Allan Nibilo, James Richardson. Executive Producers: Simon Fawcett, Nick Love, Rob Morgan, Rupert Preston, Lee Thomas, Nigel Williams. Based on a story by: Paul Andrew Williams. Written and Directed by: Tom Shankland. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On New Year's Day, two sisters and their respective families get together at a cottage in the snowy woods, in England. Their children begin to complain of feeling ill, and vomit. Soon afterwards, the children turn murderous, turning their homicidal attention to their parents. A teenager (Casey) attempts to escape from the site of the massacre with her mother, but they soon learn that the incident is not localized, that all children in the area have become infected with the disease that makes them killers.

COMMENTARY: This film is not a remake of *The Children* (1980), but it sure could be. That low-budget eighties film involved American school children exposed to a nuclear leak who go home after school and become murderers. Much of that film's lasting impact flows from the murder scenes, and, specifically, the violence directed on screen at children.

Tom Shankland's *The Children* proposes an alternate reason for children to turn murderous, exposure to a strange bug or virus. But the end result is the same. There is much death here, and many taboos broken about what can happen to children on screen in a mainstream movie. In this case, the wintry, snowbound setting provides extra punch. Shankland utilizes picturesque juxtaposition as red blood spatters on pure white snow; a metaphor for innocence being marred by violence.

The terror begins in small doses, as one child vomits unexpectedly, and then the film cuts to a close-up of cells swarming together, ostensibly bacteria or a virus forming into something new. The infection has begun. From here, parents are impaled on sleds or get dolls jammed in their intestines (!) and children are speared on broken glass shards. Through it all, Casey, the film's teenager, seems to be the only one reckoning with the truth of the situation. This is a fascinating development, and one that perhaps grants the movie a deeper meaning. The children become monsters, as though, because of their youth, they are the victim of their appetites and needs. They can't control themselves, or their actions.

Meanwhile, the parents, who are old and set in their ways, are the victims; the ones who can't cope. They can't broach a new possibility, that their offspring want them dead or have become monsters.

As a teenager, Casey straddles childhood and adulthood. She is the first one with the inklings that something is wrong. And at film's end, there is an impression that she will soon succumb to the disease that has taken the children and altered them into murderers. But in her case, it's different. In her case it seems like a recognition that a new day is dawning, and she is being recruited to thin the herd, to clean out the old guard.

This idea, of the disease as a change in the human gestalt, seems borne out by the context of the action. *The Children* is set on New Year's Day and is thus readily readable as a commentary on a passage, on the changing of the social order, and the beginning of a new era. The snowy landscape is a perfect killing field, and if the pure white snow doesn't represent the children's lost innocence, perhaps it might be read as the end of days, the falling snow and winter, for the adult population. The inference here is clearly that the phenomena turning children into killers is widespread and happening in many locations. This is a *Night of the Living Dead* type shift, the movie suggests, with monster children becoming the new norm, and the apocalypse that will destroy the human race. And since children in horror films typically represent the future, or tomorrow, the movie is hopeless too. How can there be a tomorrow when our kids are murderous and want to kill us?

The movie seems to critique the old world, our world, too. Casey describes herself, crudely as "*the abortion that got away*," suggesting that her identity is tied with that event, and that she is viewed in that way by her parents. She isn't a person. She's a choice they did not make, and perhaps, in her eyes, regret not making.

Meanwhile the holiday get-together custom depicted here seems relatively empty and devoid of

joy. The families get together because they are family, but not because they seem to enjoy each other's company. Shankland leaves a lot unsaid, a lot to the imagination, so that nothing is obvious. One can infer what the virus does, one can infer the nature of the relationships in the family, etc., but there is a restraint in the telling that some will like, and others will find wanting. It's clear that the desire and appetite here is to make an intelligent horror film that goes to some truly dark places and holds up a mirror to parents. However, the movie also becomes repetitive and at times unbelievable, as parents go in search of their misbehaving children, are killed, and so on.

Also, the film's death scenes, though bloody and impressively mounted, don't pack the same impact as those in the 1980 film of the same name, perhaps because the 2000s traveled so far in terms of torture porn and gore. It takes a lot to shock audiences these days, and *The Children* is interesting and well-made, but, for instance, doesn't showcase the shock value of something like *Eden Lake*, which is also British, from the same time period, and also features adults murdering, essentially, children.

Underneath all the violence and bloody snow in *The Children* showcases a really strong idea. It's the notion that we are not making a world our children can live in or buy into. What if Mother Nature changed our children so that they could change the world for themselves? Would it mean the end of the human race? Or just the end of the world that we have made now?

The Collector * * * *

Critical Reception

"Dunstan makes his directorial debut with this fast-paced, suspenseful horror that wastes no time on pointless exposition, but instead tosses plenty of genuinely tense moments into this primal fear-fest."—Alan Jones, *Radio Times*, June 24, 2010.

"Sick..."—Graham Young, *Birmingham Post*, June 24, 2010.

"Bestowing any worthy words upon the repellent genre known as torture-porn immediately induces stomach-twisting pangs of guilt, but it is impossible to deny that Marcus Dunstan's *The Collector* is a film of considerable style and effective story-telling."—Simon Foster, *Screen Space*, July 13, 2012.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Josh Stewart (Arkin); Juan Fernandez (The Collector); Michael Reilly Burke (Michael Chase); Andrea Roth (Victoria Chase); Karley Scott Collins (Hannah Chase); Madelina Zima (Jill Chase); Haley Alexis Pullos (Cindy); Daniella Alonso (Lisa); William Prael (Larry Wharton); Diana Ayala Goldner (Gena Wharton).

CREW: Freestyle Releasing, Fortress Features and Imaginarium Entertainment Group present *The Collector*. Casting: Monika Mikkelsen. Costume Designer: Ashlyn Angel. Music: Jerome Dillon. Director of Photography: Brandon Cox. Film Editors: Alex Luna, James Mastracco, Howard Smith. Producers: Brett Forbes, Julie Richardson, Patrick Rizzotti. Executive Producers: Charles Davidson, Mike Liddell, Jennifer Hilton. Written by: Patrick Melton, Marcus Dunstan. Directed by: Marcus Dunston. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A handyman, Arkin (Stewart), needs money to help pay off the debts of his estranged wife. He decides to rob the home of his wealthy employers, the Chase family, by night. Unfortunately, a strange serial killer, "The Collector," has also set his sights on the Chase family the same night. Inside the palatial home, Arkin finds monstrous booby traps and realizes he must outsmart the Collector and attempt to save the family he had planned to steal from.

COMMENTARY: Just repeat to yourself: critics hate torture porn, critics hate torture porn, critics hate torture porn.

And that hate for a whole genre likely accounts for the poor reception that the electrifying and

often shocking *The Collector* received on its release in 2009. Reviews, both violent, relentless film is well-made, and actually speaks trenchantly to its historical context.

The Collector's protagonist is Arkin, a blue-collar, meat-and-potatoes guy with troubles at home, a lousy job, and no good options for the future. He is, in the age of the Great Recession, a rat in a maze, just one crisis away from economic oblivion and familial dissolution. He doesn't necessarily have the education, job skills or financial resources to escape his trap, but Arkin has a good work ethic, and he's a guy with heart. He's just making it day to day, navigating a culture of economic collapse, foreclosure, and high unemployment.

The Chase house, the film's central setting, becomes the expression of Arkin's bigger, societal problems. He must navigate, escape and survive brutal trap after brutal trap, if he is to survive. And it happens in a house that he did not build (just like the American economy that collapsed), and does not own (again, just like the Economy). Instead Arkin fights for his life in a place where he did not make the rules, and where his skills are needed to help the Chases and their house endure. Again, it's not difficult to read the crisis here in economic terms, with American taxpayers footing the bill for a bailout of America's banks and richest companies. Those American taxpayers, like Arkin, played by the rules, didn't create the problem, and are now being asked to save the day.

Arkin fights the Collector, a psychopath who sees human beings as commodities, and who sets the traps in the house (again, standing in for the American economy, one might conclude). In this metaphor, The Collector is the official at the banks, perhaps, who irresponsibly played with other people's fortunes, setting traps for them to walk into, so they would lose everything.

From the film's opening act, *The Collector* takes great pains to show how Arkin is outmatched, and unimportant in the eyes of the world, and its villain too. A God's eye view early on makes the protagonist seem tiny and insignificant. And the film features many shots of wasps, spiders and other bugs, images which suggest small creatures toiling about, tending to their own affairs, under the watchful eyes of more powerful entities; entities like the Collector himself.

Even if one wishes to read no societal metaphors into *The Collector*, it is a rip-roaring good horror film, with a likeable antagonist attempting to best a maniacal serial killer/psychopath on, essentially, the killer's turf. It is true that the film features bloody bear traps, trip wires, bathtubs of blood and other horrors, in keeping with the torture porn films of its era, but again, that's the format of the day. In the 1980s, critics attacked slashers and their genre conventions as dead teenager movie and attempted to deny the sub-genre the right to exist. In a repeat environment in the 2000s, a film like *The Collector* was never going to get a fair hearing from "respectable" critics when their kneejerk response was not to analyze the film but be debauched by its existence and violent nature.

Yet, if one seeks to gaze closely at the film, and consider it the story of an economically disadvantaged guy trying to save not only his family, but other families, in a house of horrors, the film's value as economic critique becomes plain. Today, some people forget what the fall of 2008 was like, with huge, respected companies such as Goldman Sachs failing, and news media warning of societal collapse as an outcropping of these business collapses. Arkin is a sympathetic character because like him, so many Americans had to figure out how to navigate the horrors of an economy in freefall, and the idea of a house not just in disorder, but seemingly working against the average guy.

Notice too, *The Collector* doesn't have a happy ending. At least not for Arkin. Please read what you will into that fact, too.

LEGACY: A sequel, *The Collection*, was released in 2012.

*Cropsey (DTV) * **

Critical Reception

"*Cropsey* was an early Netflix streaming staple that is one of those movies that stands up under repeated

viewings in that you don't get bored. It's a documentary that plays a little fast and free with the truth—there's the urban legend of Cropsey, which is its own thing, and then there's the story of Andre Rand, a convicted child-kidnapper and alleged murderer. Then there's some evidence of Satanism (or at least Satanic rituals) in Staten Island where the child abductions/murders took place. The filmmakers mashed these three things together. There's no real evidence on hand that Rand was a Satanist. The urban legend of Cropsey matches urban legends in other parts of the world, so why the New York state urban legend is tied to Andre Rand is one of those 'okay, maybe' things—but as presented in this film, with a cheesy narration that is always hinting at the sinister, it's hard not to see this as a piece of bad journalism and okay horror-film making. It's watchable, it's repeat-watchable, and Andre Rand was very likely up to no good, but even the juries who convicted him of kidnapping the children struggled with convicting him of murder.

It's the eerie sights of the abandoned mental health/hospital facilities in Staten Island that set the tone for the film—there's a palpable sense of dread coming out of the old bricks—I'm pretty sure that's what gets under your skin to make you watch it again—those shots in the early part of the film register somewhere.”—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Josh Zeman (Himself); Barbara Brancaccio; Barbara Brancaccio (Herself).

CREW: Cinema Purgatorio, Breaking Glass Pictures, Antidote Films, Afterhours Productions, Ghost Robot and Off Hollywood Pictures present *Cropsey*. Music: Alex Lasarenko. Director of Photography: Chad Davidson. Film Editors: Anita Gabrosek, Todd Holmes, Tom Patterson. Producers: Barbara Brancaccio, Joshua Zeman. Executive Producers: Jeffrey Levy-Hinte, Zachary Mortenson. Written by: Joshua Zeman. Directed by: Barbara Brancaccio, Joshua Zeman. M.P.A.A. Rating: NR. Running time: 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: This is a documentary film about the truth behind an urban legend called Cropsey, and a series of murders in New York in the 1980s.

COMMENTARY: Filmmakers Joshua Zeman and Barbara Brancaccio open their critically acclaimed 2009 documentary *Cropsey* with a brief re-cap of a popular and long-lived urban legend; one that the movie explicitly positions in Staten Island, the least-populated and most heavily wooded borough in the state of New York. By the filmmakers' own account, the mythical figure called Cropsey is a hook or axe-wielding maniac who reputedly dwelled in the woods near a vast abandoned institution for mentally-retarded children, the notorious Willowbrook State School which Robert Kennedy famously termed a “snake pit” and which the movie aptly describes as the “*the Town's Leper Colony*.”

Parents in the 1970s and 1980s in the immediate area surrounding the 365-acre “school” warned their children not to play near the grounds for fear that Cropsey would strike. Thus, Cropsey is a local Boogeyman figure, the filmmakers establish, one “*lurking in the shadows*,” waiting to abduct and murder the good, unsuspecting children of Staten Island. He's a bedtime fairy tale parents warn their kids about to keep them in line and keep them safe.

Even before the documentary's opening credits begin, the directors enunciate their central thesis, which is this: *What if the urban legend of Cropsey is real?*

Despite this tantalizing opening gambit connecting Willowbrook State School, convicted kidnapper Andre Rand (alias Frank Rushan), and Staten Island itself to the regional, long-standing Cropsey urban legend, this is not actually the case Zeman and Brancaccio present in the text of their feature film.

In fact, the stated thesis is virtually ignored.

Specifically, murder suspect Andre Rand's connection to the legend of the so-called “Cropsey Maniac” is tenuous at best, fatuous at worst. In no meaningful, substantive or even rudimentary fashion does *Cropsey* explore the urban legend of Cropsey. There is no discussion whatsoever of the killer's unusual name—*Cropsey*—a moniker that may have originated in Brooklyn, near *Cropsey Avenue* (around Coney Island) and in close relation to the Creedmore Psychiatric Center, constructed in 1912.

There is no mention of the fact that the word “crop” means to “cut off” or to “cut very short,” a verbal approximation of this killer’s murderous activities.

Or that to crop also means “to harvest” and “sow,” and that this legendary killer “sows” revenge for the wrongful murder of a member of his family. All of these aspects of the urban legend are important. They hint at the reasons *why* this particular tale exists and flourishes from one generation to the next.

Nor is there discussion in *Cropsey* of the fact that, in the early eighties, a cult slasher film called *The Burning* featured a villainous killer called “Cropsey,” and that the character stalked a summer camp, the location for most Cropsey tales going back to the disco-decade. A clip or still from the pertinent film might have been nice; revealing how the urban legend arrived in the pop culture lexicon and expanded its grasp on the popular imagination.

In 2006, folklorist Libby Tucker usefully summarized the urban legend in an article for *Voices*, called “Cropsey at Camp”:

According to the Cropsey legend’s usual plot line, Cropsey was a respected community member who lived near the camp with his son. When a couple of campers accidentally caused his son’s tragic death, Cropsey went mad and swore that he would get revenge. Running off to hide in a shack in the woods, he waited until the anniversary of his son’s death. Then he randomly chose a camper to attack with an axe. The unfortunate camper died instantly. If I were a counselor telling this story to a group of campers huddled around a campfire, I would end the story with its usual clincher: “*Cropsey is still out in these woods. Tonight is the anniversary of his son’s death, and he may pay a visit to your bunk at midnight. Good luck!*”³²

Tucker further writes about the hunt for the historical Cropsey: “My first example comes from Maureen Berliner, who posted her recollections of Cropsey stories on the popular web site KidsCamps.com (www.kidscamps.com) in 1997. Her earliest memories of Cropsey scares date back to the mid-1970s. Berliner remembers that the first camp she attended, Camp Orensika Sonikwa, had a framed article hanging on the wall: a copy of the original newspaper piece about Cropsey. This piece of proof seems to confirm that Cropsey is a real person.”³³

Right here, as one can immediately detect, *there’s a trail to excavate* in discovering the truth or non-truth of the Cropsey urban legend, the stated purpose of this cinematic documentary. Maureen Berliner, former attendee at Camp Orensika Sonikwa, claims to have seen *a newspaper article* that features the story of the real Cropsey.

So why wasn’t this article tracked down, or its existence disputed in the film? In the movie, there is zero follow-up on claims of this sort; no attempt whatsoever to uncover the documented origination of the proverbial Cropsey. There is no interview with Berliner either, who claims to have seen such documentation with *her own eyes*.

Furthermore, the movie does not investigate the variations of the myth at locations like Surprise Lake Camp, also surveyed by Tucker, a folklore teacher at Binghamton University. The filmmakers, it seems, actually feel no interest in determining if there is an historical Cropsey, who he might actually be, or where his story may have originated.

The documentary, *Cropsey*, is very much a case of bait-and-switch. The movie is called *Cropsey*, and the text of the film suggests that the “urban legend” of Cropsey is real but it makes no attempt to find if there is, actually, a historical Cropsey. Instead, the movie involves the true-crime case of the inscrutable, suspicious Andre Rand, and his guilt or innocence in a series of kidnappings and murders on Staten Island, crimes spanning the years 1972–1987. In particular, Rand was apprehended for the disappearance of 12-year-old Jennifer Schwieger in 1987, according to *The New York Times*.³⁴ Mysteriously, Jennifer’s corpse was discovered on the grounds of Willowbrook almost immediately following reports in the media of Rand’s capture, despite the fact that search teams had gone over that very area before and found nothing. Some suspected a frame-up. This is indeed a disturbing criminal case, and a tragic one without many answers.

But it doesn’t involve Cropsey or his urban legend in any substantive way.

If one seeks to find the truth of the legendary Cropsey (again, the stated goal of this film...), I submit, the way to go about it, is to learn all the variations of the long-lived story and determine if a

man named *Cropsey* ever really lived. And then, if he did, pinpoint the locations of the crimes he is responsible for.

Did crimes occur there? Who was guilty? Are the crimes still occurring? Or is the legend merely a legend?

Significantly, *Cropsey* makes no effort to put Rand at the scene of *any* Cropsey crimes save for the so-called “*unlucky seven*” on Staten Island. The movie thus makes no effort to connect Rand’s story to the actual details of the urban legend (the plot for revenge because of a family member’s unjust death), either. In other words, the use of the name *Cropsey* in this film is a total gimmick. The pre-existing Cropsey urban legend is not the subject of the film at all. Accordingly, the film’s thesis is never proven or even addressed, actually. The film ends, and there is no exploration of whether or not the “*urban legend is real*.” No real connection has been made between Rand and the details of Cropsey’s tale.

Unfortunately, this bait-and-switch in presentation fits in with the filmmakers’ tendency to sensationalize their story and insert themselves into it. First, they seize on subject matter their movie doesn’t truly concern—the *Cropsey urban legend*—and then, they inject themselves into the proceedings, at about the hour-point, to explore the dark, “scary” tunnels of Willowbrook.

In pitch-black night, of course.

Front and center before the camera, our two intrepid documentarians bicker. “*I’m going in there,*” insists Joshua, looking into the dark abyss of Willowbrook. “*I’m not going in there,*” counters Barbara Brancaccio. “*I’m going in there,*” Joshua reiterates. This debate goes back and forth, and you get the sense the filmmakers are trying to re-capture the magic of *The Blair Witch Project*.

On the dark grounds, the filmmakers (with the camera on, naturally) just happen to encounter a group of strangers armed with blinding flashlights. The strangers turn out to be harmless local kids.

False alarm!

But the subject of the film at this point is Devil Worship and Devil Cults, and so this image of dark, silhouetted strangers adds to the storyline’s creepy vibe. Indeed, this whole incident seems awfully contrived.

Would a good, earnest documentarian really undertake this expedition to Willowbrook at night? Especially knowing that the tunnel system is still ostensibly populated by possibly unstable homeless people? With Rand, the movie’s alleged Boogeyman behind bars, what were the filmmakers seeking there at night?

A jolt moment for the audience, apparently.

Or, perhaps—like the title of the film itself—this scene is another slick attempt to ramp up the marketable, sensational aspects of the documentary.

One wishes the filmmakers had resisted the urge to inject themselves into the action as on-screen personalities, like characters in a horror movie. It feels cheap, especially given that the real, tragic subject matter of the film involves children who were murdered, and the pain their parents still carry to this day.

Despite such considerable concerns and questions about the film’s organization and presentation, there are many elements of *Cropsey* that are laudable, and impressive. Like some true-life variation on Rod Serling’s “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street,” the movie carefully makes the case that the community of Staten Island has literally become unhinged by the terrifying abductions and murders. So desperate is the community, down to the police officers, to catch a culprit (*any* culprit...), that Rand is brought to trial and convicted with no real physical or forensic evidence connecting him to at least one of the disappearances.

In their need to find and punish a monster, these good people seem to fall into blind hysteria. They are so desperate for “closure” that they don’t stop to think if the *right* man has been apprehended. One of the victim’s fathers seems to understand this mistake and the rush to judgment. “*Closure is a bullshit word,*” he suggests. His daughter is likely dead, her body has never been located, and he will never really know for sure the facts of her whereabouts, even if “the law” has deemed Rand guilty and put him behind bars. What kind of closure is that, really? It’s *cover-your-ass* closure; meant to soothe a worried, possibly dangerous mob.

In the community’s eyes, Rand has ascended to the level of literally, *as the headlines scream*, a

"Hannibal Lecter." In the press, in the community, in the shared history of Staten Island, Rand becomes not merely a very sick man, but something infinitely worse, and far eviler. He's "a white-trash Jim Jones," mesmerizing a cult-following of the dangerous homeless on the grounds of Willowbrook. He's a "necrophiliac," having sex with corpses in a local graveyard. He's involved in Satanic, *devil-worshipping* activities, holding black mass by moonlight.

As the film rightly points out at this juncture, it's impossible to distinguish "*facts from folklore*" in Rand's case.

But again, this is *not* the folklore of Cropsey, the urban legend. That's an important distinction. This is a community's faulty but understandable way of dealing with something authentically horrible. If the movie had been called *Rand*, or *Disappearances at Willowbrook*, there would be nothing complain about because the filmmakers have done a fine, admirable, extremely dedicated job examining the Rand case. But *they* named the film *Cropsey*; *they* opened with the supposition that maybe, just maybe, Cropsey's urban legend is real.

And then they don't follow through on any of it.

But again, one can't entirely dismiss this movie out-of-hand. Another fascinating aspect of *Cropsey* involves the fashion in which the filmmakers build a case for the "*subterranean*," secret history of Staten Island. With maps, good location photography, interviews, and TV news footage, the movie explains, in assiduous detail, how Staten Island was, for much of its existence, a dumping ground.

In one corner, you've got *the Farm Colony*, where tuberculosis patients were left to rot. At Willowbrook, nearly five thousand mentally retarded kids were warehoused, forgotten and ignored by society at large. And the island is also "*one big garbage dump*" for New York City, a dump so large it can be seen from Earth orbit, as an interviewee humorously notes.

What are the psychological ramifications of this bizarre, dark history? *What undercurrents are at large?* The movie points out that when Willowbrook was closed in the mid-1980s, many patients took to the hospital's tunnel system, remaining on the grounds as squatters. They became, as the movie describes them, "*a whole underground of people*."

Underground people, subterranean history? *What must this past do to the psyche of a community?* And, as the movie also points out, it's easier to blame those "*underground people*" for a terrible crime than to look to your affluent neighbor down the street. Andre Rand may very well be guilty of the crimes he was convicted of; but he's also a very *convenient* suspect. His famous perp walk shows him to be mentally ill, at least.

Cropsey is not really about a famous urban legend, as it promises. It fails resoundingly to deliver on its thesis. But on the other hand, the movie gets powerfully at the idea that our society looks for scapegoats, not necessarily the guilty, when something terrible occurs. The movie proves that we don't always seek truth; sometimes we just seek monsters to punish.

And in pursuing that quest, we elevate a flawed man to the realm of urban legend. Rand isn't Cropsey, but he might as well be, given the news report and hysteria concerning him.

I just squared the circle there, linking Andre Rand to our societal need to create boogeymen, to create urban legends. I wish the movie squared the circle too.

In summation, *Cropsey* is very intelligently, very poignantly about the tragic Andre Rand case, yet very exploitatively and sensationally about the Cropsey urban legend. The documentary is one thing sold under the guise of being something else. That the "*something else*" in this case is actually troubling, compelling, intriguing and inarguably well-presented is sort of beside the point.

Mid-way through the film, Andre Rand expresses the idea that the people and law enforcement officials of Staten Island are "*perpetrators of a fraud*" and that "*evil-ness sells*."

Perhaps the makers of *Cropsey* learned that lesson too well?

*Dawning (DTV) * * * 1/2*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Najarra Townsend (Aurora); Jonas Goslow (Chris); David Coral (Richard); Christine Kellogg-Darrin (Laura); Daniel Jay Salmen (The Man).

CREW: Wholecrue Productions, Breaking Glass Pictures, and Dawning present *Dawning*. Music: Nathaniel Levisay. Director of Photography: Thomas TJ Schwingle. Film Editors: Gregg Holtkgrew, Mike Koellen. Producers: Gregg Holtgrewe, Michael D. Howe, Brendan Reynolds, Danny Salmen. Written by: Gregg Holtgrewe and Matthew Wilkins. Directed by: Gregg Holtgrewe. M.P.A.A. Rating: NR. Running time: 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: College-aged siblings Chris (Goslow) and Aurora (Townsend) visit their estranged father, Richard (Coral), at his cabin in the woods. Richard, a recovering alcoholic, has separated from Chris and Aurora's mother and is now dating a woman named Laura (Kellogg-Darrin). Meanwhile, Chris is contemplating quitting school, and Aurora is scarred by her parents' divorce and her father's lack of attention and devotion. As Chris and Aurora arrive at the remote cabin, the happy family reunion turns awkward with recriminations, guilt-trips, accusations, and innuendo. Then, the family dog is mysteriously wounded while the family gathers for a campfire to roast marshmallows. After the dog's death, a mad, armed stranger (Salmen) breaks into the cabin and holds the family at gunpoint. "*It's waiting*," he insists, describing some unseen monster that apparently murdered his girlfriend. The family attempts to overpower the stranger and notify the police about their predicament, but the phone lines are out. Meanwhile, bizarre, unearthly noises keep emanating from the woods and from the roof of the cabin. After a time, each member of the family disappears into the woods. And when they are seen again, they seem different, wrong.

COMMENTARY: Horror films that accomplish a lot with very little are not that common anymore, and director Gregg Holtgrewe's *Dawning* (2009) fits that bill. *Dawning* is an ultra-low-budget, rough-around-the-edges affair, a sort of *The Evil Dead* (1983) meets *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) only with no special effects and no monsters.

Actually, that's not a completely accurate description. There are monsters in this film, but at times they appear to be of the personal, self-doubting, *human variety* rather than demonic ones. In short, *Dawning* concerns a dysfunctional family that comes together for a weekend retreat in the woods but soon encounters *Something Evil*. That evil is either an invisible, monstrous creature that seizes on interpersonal weakness and human foibles, or the Monster from the family's collective Id: the self-doubt of the *dramatis personae* made manifest; a sense of personal paranoia that grows and roils until murder is the only possible outcome.

Buttressed by an unsettling musical score, some excellent cinematography and a lot of canny editing, *Dawning* proves an arresting and suspenseful experience. At several critical junctures during *Dawning*, characters hear their own worst thoughts vocalized in the voices of their beloved family members.

Now, in the actual cuts, the audience never actually witnesses those family members speaking such unkind, ugly words. It's all craftily accomplished so that it becomes plain that the characters are hearing opinions that have *never actually been stated by another human being*. Those insults and attacks are either the Monster's doing, or human insecurities somehow being broadcast. But the effect is insidious: like having a nagging, betraying, personal Iago in your ear at all times, saying just the thing to confirm

your low opinion of yourself. It's unsettling, and highly imaginative, and *Dawning* plays diabolically on the idea that something evil is tearing this family unit apart, and that it thrives on division and insecurity. In the environment of the 2000s, with so much anger and division poisoning the national dialogue, the film also erects a powerful case that everyone is hearing their own ugliness echoing in their heads, assuming it comes from others, and then striking back. In this way, *Dawning* seems to concern projection.

It's quite possible there is no monster in the film, just a sweeping, multiplying sense of mistrust and dysfunction. Even the film's revelatory shot, seen in a flash of lightning, could be no more than a phantasm. From one point of view, it's as if all the dysfunction of the family coheres into a supernatural entity and then threatens its creators. The component parts of this particular Beast are substance abuse, resentment over divorce, anger over Richard's brand of judgmental machismo and other aspects of interpersonal strife and alienation.

Dawning is a really low-budget horror film, one that stretches its meager budget to the fullest, but which can't really show anything besides some very troubled characters arguing inside a small cabin for eighty minutes.

For some viewers, this clearly won't be enough.

Yet *Dawning* gets under your skin and discomforts, in large part because of the ambiguity of the monster. It's the polar opposite of most genre films being made in this era: no fast cuts, no elaborate special effects, and little concentration on grue and guts. The film's performances are serviceable and sometimes more than that, in the case of the impressive Goslow. But in so many significant ways, Holtgrewe is the real star of *Dawning*. As a director, he's got a strong eye for composition, and the unique ability to craft frightening images just by carefully observing natural vistas or holding a shot perhaps a little longer than usual or seems right. *Dawning* ably and gamely plays with form, and as a result doesn't look, feel, or sound like the average, processed genre film.

In fact, it may "dawn" on the audience during a viewing of *Dawning* that many genre films of considerably higher budget could learn a thing or two about crafting atmosphere and suspense from this diamond-in-the-rough.

Dead Snow (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Vegar Hoel (Martin); Stig Frode Henriken (Roy); Charlotte Frogner (Hanna); Lasse Valdal (Vegard); Evy Kasseth Rosten (Liv); Jeppe Beck Laursen (Erlend); Jenny Skavlan (Chris); Ane Dahl Torp (Sara); Bjorn Sundquist (Turgaer); Orjan Gamst (Oberst Herzog).

CREW: IFC Films, Euforia Films, Barentsfilmm AS, Film Camp, Miho Film, News on Request, Yellow Bastard Production and Zwart Arbeid present *Dead Snow*. Casting: Andrea Barbin. Production Designer: Liv Ask. Costume Designer: Linn Henriksen. Special Effects: Storm Studios. Music: Christian Wibe. Director of Photography: Matthew Bradley Weston. Film Editor: Martin Stoltz. Producer: Tomas Evjen, Terje Stromstad. Executive Producers: Magne Ek, Kjetil Omberg, Harald Zwart. Written by: Tommy Wirkola and Stig Frode Henriksen. Directed by: Tommy Wirkola. M.P.A.A. Rating: NR. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Norway, a group of medical students go to a cabin on a mountain to wait for their friend, Sara (Torp), to join them. Sara, however, has been killed by Nazi zombies. Worse, the med students have taken the zombies' gold, which they found in the cabin, hidden since 1942. Now the Nazi zombies will not stop their siege upon the cabin until their stolen property is returned to them.

COMMENTARY: A delightful and willfully over-the-top gorefest, *Dead Snow* is just the kind of fun movie that the horror film format needed more of, if it hoped to find its way back to normality at the end of a dark decade of torture porn and grim remakes.

Sure, the 2000s were a serious, troubling time. But horror films have often worked best, historically speaking, when acknowledging how ridiculous their stories can be. Excited by its own insanity, the bravura, fast-moving *Dead Snow* very much adopts the playful spirit of *Evil Dead 2* (1987) as it pits a group of intrepid med students against the zombies of the Third Reich. In vetting this crazy tale, the filmmakers pay homage to horror films of yesteryear, but also stage some of the most over-the-top and disgusting set-pieces this side of a Sam Raimi film.

The filmmakers understand that simplicity is a virtue. Hence, they combine some very basic elements to vet their tale: a cabin in the snow, seven main characters, and hordes of Nazi zombies. The filmmakers make their characters transgress by stealing zombie gold, and then the rest of the movie is a sustained siege on the humans by the Satanic S.S. soldiers. Along the way towards its utterly bananas denouement, *Dead Snow* finds time to mention *Friday the 13th* (1980), *Evil Dead* (1983) and *April Fool's Day* (1986). It also names the lead Nazi general after a famous filmmaker: Herzog. These references are playful, and let the audience know that the filmmakers are in on the joke. Although fast-moving and scary, *Dead Snow* is not really to be taken seriously. It's a gory, grotesque, goofball of a film.

The set-pieces in the film are remarkable in terms of their breadth and execution. There's one memorable scene featuring a character named Chris (Skavlan) in an outhouse. While he is taking a dump, one of the women in the group interrupts him and has sex with him, all while he's still crapping ... which is gross. After that already sort of disgusting moment, the zombies attack the outhouse, and Chris gets pulled down into the pit of feces. It's so over-the-top and wrong, from start to finish, that it's funny.

The film's villains, the Nazi Zombies, turn out to be not very fine people at all. They rise up from the snow and begin to kill the med students in the most impolite ways. They rip people apart, and long, stringy intestines should be billed as supporting characters, since they are seen on-screen so frequently. At one point, there's another wicked joke that bears repeating. One of the characters, Martin (Hoel), is afraid of infection by zombie, so he amputates the arm where he has been bitten. After a while, he seems to take way too much pleasure in this act, and just wants to keep amputating. He has to be convinced by another survivor not to keep doing so. One supposes he's studying to be a surgeon at med school, and just got carried away?

Dead Snow's final sting-in-the-tail/tale is that the zombies will stop attacking if their treasure is returned. But as the film's lone survivor finds out the hard way, this rule means that every single solitary piece must be returned, or there's no cease-fire, so-to-speak.

This author isn't sure if there is anything deep going on here. All that's for certain is that *Dead Snow* is a jolting good time, a bloody and fun horror film and the decade could have used more films that captured the same ridiculous spirit.

*The Descent: Part 2 (DTV) * * **

Critical Reception

"*The Descent* was an instant classic—its sequel is actually pretty good, barring a plot contrivance (giving some trauma-induced short term memory loss to your hero to get her to go back to a hellish place makes sense from a plot perspective, but it's never going to taste right). For this viewer, the sequel was less traumatic than the original but still managed to recreate some of the main scares from the first film. Some surprising reappearances from the first film add a jolt of adrenaline, upping the stakes for our hero, Sarah. There is also a hint of a slightly larger mythology at work here through the character of an old miner named Ed who clearly knows about the crawlers—one wonders how and why.

If you hunt around on YouTube, you can find different endings for *The Descent* that can muddy or even

prevent this sequel from happening—they're worth checking out. When I found there was a sequel and the character of Sarah was even involved, my first thought was how on Earth are they going to get her to go back down there (paging Ellen Ripley), but continuing her story worked well. The first film had a sense of someone trying to crawl out from an abyss that preceded Sarah and her friends ever going into the caves—the sequel has a little less of that going on, but it's satisfying nonetheless.”—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Shauna MacDonald (Sarah Carter); Natalie Mendoza (Juno); Alex Reid (Beth); Michael J. Reynolds (Ed Oswald); Jessica Williams (Susanne Small); Douglas Hodge (Dan); Joshua Dalls (Greg); Anna Skellern (Cath); Gavan O'Herlihy (Vaines); Krysten Cummings (Rios); Doug Ballard (Dr. Roger Payne). Josh Cole (Lynch); Saskia Mulder (Rebecca); Nora-Jane Noon (Holly); MyAnna Buring (Sam); robin Berry, Adam Harvey, Nicholas Daines, Kengo Oshima (Crawlers).

CREW: Lionsgate Home Entertainment, Celador Films, Canal+ and Pathe present *The Descent: Part 2*. Casting: Gail Stevens. Costume Designer: Nancy Thompson. Production Designer: Simon Bowles. Special Effects: Filmgate. Music: David Julian. Director of Photography: Sam McCurdy. Film Editor: John Harris. Producers: Christian Colson, Ivan MacKinnon. Executive Producers: Neil Marshall, Paul Smith. Written by: James McCarthy, J. Blakeson, James Watkins. Directed by: Jon Harris. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In North Carolina, search teams scour the mountains where Sarah Carter (MacDonald), Juno (Mendoza) and their fellow cave divers disappeared days earlier. Sarah is found by rescuers and taken to the hospital, where she appears to be experiencing amnesia about what happened in the caves, in particular her battle with Juno and the siege by the underground cave dwellers. The local sheriff believes Sarah may be responsible for the murder of the rest of the expedition, and takes her back underground with experienced cave explorers, using the Chapel Mine elevator. Once down in the dark caves, Sarah's memory returns, and the cave dwellers launch an attack. Sarah also has a final reunion with Juno, who is still alive.

COMMENTARY: *The Descent: Part 2* is a well-made, faithful and gory sequel to one of the most harrowing films of the 2000s. The sequel plays even better if watched immediately after the first film. It feels like a genuine continuation in terms of character arcs, conflicts, and central scenario. Even the visualizations feel consistent. For those who grew up in the 1980s this is not a small matter. Virtually every new *Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Friday the 13th* sequel during that era featured a new look, a new cast of characters, and different feel or vibe, according to the taste of the new director.

By contrast, *The Descent: Part 2* is of a piece with the original, and that grants it a sense of energy and momentum. The only regrettable part of the entire sequel affair perhaps, is the downbeat ending, which is unnecessarily bleak and defeatist, especially for a film that is all about one thing: emerging from the dark (both psychically and literally). One can't help but feel that the film's ending undercuts that subtext. Incidentally, this sequel also proves incredibly disgusting, and perhaps tops the original's gore quotient with an unforgettable scene involving a cave dweller excrement pond where the creatures void their waste. And yes, it's absolutely as disgusting as it sounds.

The thematic territory of *The Descent* franchise is, as noted above, all about a thematic and literal exploration of both a psychic or mental dark space, and a physical one. The cave divers of the original, all women, go down into that primordial cave and experience darkness and death on a horrific scale. For Sarah, however, she has also gone to a dark place mentally, because of the death of her husband and child, and also the revelation that her best friend, Juno, had an extra-marital affair with her husband.

The Descent: Part II doesn't feel like a cheap money grab on a brand name because this idea is extended thoughtfully. Sarah has not vanquished her demons and must return to the dark place to conquer the literal demons (the cave dwellers) and reach a human reckoning with Juno (the

metaphorical dark place). Although the caves seem a little less expressionistic this time in terms of their coloring and lighting, the return trip to this underground Hell is worthwhile, and relevant to the character arcs.

Sometimes we must return to our dark places to fully put them to rest. We can't emerge on a sunlit day, until that dark baggage is dealt with. *The Descent: Part 2* gives Sarah the opportunity to vanquish these literal and metaphorical demons, at least before the poorly considered ending. She and Juno get a rapprochement that is worth the price of admission, and which pays respect to their history and friendship. In the end, both of these characters, whom the audience has come to care for, have their humanity restored, at least in relation to their friendship. Sure, Juno's last act is to take a bite out of an attacking cave dweller, but in terms of Sarah, matters have been resolved. The film's last dialogue exchange between the two ("I'm sorry," "It's okay") is appropriately basic given the nightmarish setting and gruesome events happening, yet oddly touching, given all they have endured together.

As a model, *The Descent: Part 2* certainly uses the *Aliens* (1986) template, but this feels like a worthy call-back or homage, not a choice to be derivative. Both *The Descent: Part 2* and Cameron's 80s film are continuations of a saga, featuring a strong female action hero (Sarah and Ripley, respectively). Both films feature that character facing their nightmare situation by returning to the location of the trauma. And both films feature the hero battling hordes of swarming, hissing inhuman monsters. In a decade of butt-kicking female action heroes such as Alice and Selene, Sarah is a grounded, human hero, and also very admirable. If the first *Descent* is woman-powered with its single gendered cast, the second film at least honors that approach. The last act sees Sarah, Juno and Rios battling it out to survive. And Sarah, like Ripley before her, puts to bed her real and psychic demons.

Unfortunately, unlike Ripley, she doesn't survive to see a third series installment.

There is a trade off in *The Descent: Part 2*, for certain. The film feels a lot less claustrophobic than the first one was, but it ramps up the gore quotient in keeping with the sequel rule of "carnage candy." The claustrophobia card probably couldn't be played as effectively as an organizing principle the second time around. By contrast, the gore here is incredible. The scene wherein a cave dweller emerges to defecate in the pond of feces is truly a sight. The humans trapped underground must submerge in the goopy excrement, and the film shows the creature actually excreting, as droppings emerge from its squatting hind quarters.

Now that's entertainment.

All jokes aside, this disgusting scene actually adds to the verisimilitude of the film's premise. Sarah, Juno and the others have discovered an underground civilization or society, for lack of a better word. The audience sees how they eat, where they throw the bones of their feasts, and gets a sense for their hunting grounds. This sequel shows the audience where they shit, reminding viewers that as monstrous as these beings are, they are organic biological beings much like we are, only evolved to survive in their environment. They act according to that evolution and their instincts.

A juxtaposition might be made to Sarah and Juno. Is their bad behavior (infidelity, vengeance) also a result of their evolution and instinct? And if it is, could the thing that makes us human be our ability to defy that evolution and instinct; to rise above our basest qualities? Again, Sarah and Juno, in the midst of a battle for survival, are able to forgive one another.

This reviewer first saw *The Descent: Part 2* some years, and therefore some distance, from the first film. At that point, it felt like an unnecessary rehash. In preparing this book, I watched the films back-to-back, and liked the sequel much more than I had previously. This is the way I recommend viewers approach the film. It functions more than ably as a continuation of a larger story and settles some of the character conflicts in a way superior to the first film's more savage approach.

Alas, the ending of the film comes out of left field and is unnecessarily dark. After all the good work done by the film's actors, director, editor and so on, the final scenes play a bit like we're the ones in the feces pond, getting shitted on.

Sarah deserved a moment in the sunlight.

Drag Me to Hell * * * *

Critical Reception

"When violence appears in Raimi's *Drag Me to Hell*, it's not meant to be real, often it's hilarious, and what Raimi tries to show is what is going on in the mind of his principal character."—Kaleem Aftab, *The Independent*, May 15, 2009.

"Sam Raimi made some wonderfully fun horror films once upon a time, as our favorite moron Ash fought some Deadites across multiple times and landscapes. Then Raimi entered the world of *Spider-Man* and came up with a solid two-outta-three at bat with everyone's favorite web slinger. There was a moment in *Spider-Man 2* where Doc Ock's arms came to life in a hospital where you could tell Raimi was missing the horror genre a little bit. *Drag Me to Hell* was Raimi's triumphant return to horror and a fun ride it is. Although written before the *Spider-Man* films, I think what we saw here is Raimi throwing off the reins that had stifled him and going all out with his kind of horror film, loaded with comedy, some gross-outs, some scares, some admittedly dopey mythology thrown in. You could just sense the fun Raimi was having in this film and it was infectious. Surprisingly, it feels like no one saw this film, or at least no one talks about it. It's exactly the kind of high-energy, crowd-pleasing horror film that you would have expected the world to embrace but didn't. I remember the audience in the theater where I saw this film laughing regularly and applauding when the film ended, and then it seemed to be forgotten, lost in the summer season of 2009 (it was released in late May of 2009, perhaps not the best timing for an edgy horror-comedy). Too bad—this is among Raimi's best."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

"Sam Raimi's wild ride of goo harks back to the savage 70s cinema of Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven and films like *The Legend of Hell House*. Much of the violence is implied, with shadows and loud jolts to startle the audience. This is not to say the film doesn't ooze with bodily functions, burrowing insects, and other acts of terror.

Unlike the slasher films of the 80s, where sex and drugs led to topless victims' demise, Alison Lohman's Christine DOES wrong this woman for purely self-aggrandizing motives. She knows that by speeding up the eviction, her chauvinistic boss will slide the assistant manager role her way. Though she doesn't warrant a one-way ticket to brimstone and hellfire, she's no innocent lamb.

Unlike Raimi's early *Evil Dead* films, this parable is partially rooted in reality. While the kids in *Evil Dead* discover a Book of the Dead and unleash a tree beast, Christine's moral dilemma is commonplace in our foul economy and toppling housing market. Though the punishment is extreme, audience members who have had their credit shattered in a recession would relish imagining those who have shredded our credit cards and kicked us out of our homes getting their just desserts instead of large bonuses.

Typical in a Raimi film, gallows humor—including jokes at the expense of a slaughtered beloved pet—will have audiences shamelessly tittering.

Lohman, a talented actress who made a splash in *White Oleander* and *Matchstick Men*, has a youthful innocence that works perfectly for the role. Her girlish voice and meekness give way to desperation and animalistic self-preservation as her options vanish. Because of the ridiculous premise, a lesser actress would have sunk the character's credence, particularly as Christine becomes more frantic. Lohman's sense of both panic and morbid humor is never lost amongst the special effects.

As the primal woman shamed by someone she sees as a little girl in a business suit, Lorna Raver is magnificently macabre and ferocious as a barely human beast, an almost mythical creature with one cataract eye and green-pus-filled fingernails, who hacks brown phlegm and attacks her prey like a rabid dog. The woman's frail frame only makes her assaults more outrageous.

The haunting presence is enhanced by Christopher Young's spine-tingling score that pays homage to *Amityville Horror* and *Rosemary's Baby*.

Drag Me to Hell is a ride to Hades that anyone hankering for a fright will gladly climb aboard."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Alison Lohman (Christine Brown); Justin Log (Clay Dalton); Lorna Raver (Mrs. Ganush); Dileep Rao (Rham Jas); David Paymer (Mr. Jacks); Adriana Barraza (Shaun San Dená); Chelcie Ross (Leonard Dalton); Reggie Lee (Stu Rubin); Molly Cheek (Trudy Dalto); Bojana Novakovic (Ilenka Ganus); Kevin Foster (Milos); Alexis Cruz (Farm Worker); Ruth Livier (Farm Worker's Wife); Shiloh Selassie (Farm Worker's Son).

CREW: Universal Studios and Ghost House Pictures present with Buckaroo Entertainment, Curse

Productions, and Mandate Pictures a film Producers Wonderworks Films, *Drag Me to Hell*. Casting: John Papsidera. Production Designer: Steve Saklad. Costume Designer: Isis Mussenden. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Ghost VFX, Tippett Studio, IE. Effects. Music: Christopher Young. Director of Photography: Peter Deming. Film Editing: Bob Murawski. Producer: Grant Curtis, Rob Tapert. Executive Producer: Joe Drake, Nathan Kahane. Written by: Ivan and Sam Raimi. Directed by: Sam Raimi. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Christine Brown (Lohman), a loan officer the Wilshire Pacific Bank, sees her promotion to assistant manager is threatened by Stu (Lee), an obsequious and treacherous co-worker. The boss, Mr. Jacks (Paymer), likes the fact that Stu isn't afraid to "*make hard calls*" and big decisions in support of the bank. One day, an old gypsy woman, Sylvia Ganush (Raver), arrives at the bank asking for Christine's help. Because of a recent, prolonged illness, the elderly lady has fallen behind making her mortgage payments, and—on this very day—the bank is set to foreclose. Hoping to be seen as tough and loyal to the bank, Christine refuses to help Ms. Ganush prevent eviction. In response, the old woman summons a terrifying gypsy curse. She activates "Lamia," a demonic spirit who will drag Christine to Hell in three days if the curse cannot be broken.

COMMENTARY: *Drag Me to Hell* is Sam Raimi's lean and laudable exercise in virtuoso technique and directorial audacity. Accordingly, the production shows off the director's unwavering capacity to garner laughs amidst screams. Not to mention his absolute, almost maniacal obsession with entertaining and surprising the hell out of his audience, *no matter the cost to your nerves, no matter the dictates of movie decorum, and no matter the edicts of good taste.*

So be warned: cuddly little kittens don't emerge unscathed.

No blood flood is too ... *moist*.

And every spine-tingling jolt is punctuated by bombastic, explosive moments on the soundtrack, the aural equivalent of shock treatment. This is a big, bold, confident horror movie that spares no attempt to scare you silly. With *silly* being the operative word, at least at a few critical points.

Although the film depicts a rather straightforward tale about a gypsy curse, *Drag Me to Hell* achieves some special resonance in the hothouse climate of the 2008–2009 economic recession. The banking system that Christine is a part of requires her to make a deliberate selection between her humanity and her employer's bottom line. It's a world in which decency and humanity don't matter, in which those qualities are, in fact, looked upon as weaknesses, not virtues. Christine's promotion hinges on her ability to destroy the life and dignity of another human being, not her ability to help that human being. She judges others on their credit scores, but what is Christine's spiritual credit score? That is the field of moral debate in the film.

Old Mrs. Ganush—part hyperactive Deadite and part taunting Wicked Witch of the West (and possessed of a mean set of removable teeth)—warns Christine that "soon" the tables will be turned; that the unfortunate girl will be begging *her* for help. That warning turns out to be true: Christine quickly finds herself in the very position of desperate Mrs. Ganush: with no one to help her; no higher authority to consult, and *no place at all to turn*.

Christine requires \$10,000 in 24 hours to pay for the assistance of a medium. Accordingly, she must pawn all of her beloved middle-class belongings, from jewelry to electronic equipment, to childhood treasures. Now the shoe is truly on the other foot, and the person foreclosing on another person's house sees her own "soul" being foreclosed upon by a merciless collector. The message *Drag Me to Hell* imparts is really that, for the most part anyway, we live in a culture in which people don't seem to believe that there is a spiritual price for our behavior here on Earth.

The audience knows Christine's moral sin: putting career advancement above basic human decency. But other characters are similarly part of the same broken "system." Stu steals from Christine on the job to get ahead of her in line for the promotion. Mr. Jacks plays his employees against each other, and when Christine is overcome by a real gusher of a bloody nose, he doesn't even ask if she's

okay. Christine, she wants to know if her fountaining blood got in *his* mouth. Even Clay's disapproving parents—judging Christine's worth from the comfortable vantage point of their opulent mansion—are highly uncharitable in their conclusions.

Christine's help comes from two sources in the film: a caring boyfriend, Clay, and—tellingly—two ethnic minorities: the Latino medium, Shaun San Dana, and the Indian fortune teller, Rham Jas (Dileep Rao). It is Jas, in fact, who quotes Jung's famous line about the intellect, and the intellect's inability to grasp the totality of the world. Jung said: "*The totality of the psyche can never be grasped by the intellect alone.*" Indeed, to grasp that totality—and to quote an Obama-ism—we require more than logic or law; we require *empathy*.

That's not a bad word, no matter what the Rush Limbaughs of the world were saying about it during this era. Empathy is but a necessary human understanding that there are things in this world more important than the bottom line, or more important than the agenda of corporations, credit card companies and financial institutions that are lucky enough to be deemed "*too big too fail.*" Empathy is an understanding that not everybody who fails in life did so because they were a deadbeat, a con artist, or the most mythological of boogeyman: the evil welfare queen. Sometimes, events conspire against us (an illness here, an accident there). Yet if our system can't distinguish those tragedies from real turpitude, then we have lost the capacity, as a civilization, to make meaningful moral distinctions.

Given this idea of "spiritual" bankruptcy and an evil spirit foreclosing on our souls, it's downright fascinating the way in *Drag Me to Hell* that Raimi deploys rather unconventional objects as weapons in Christine's battle for survival. One critical engagement is fought between the vengeful Ms. Ganush and Christine. *with office supplies*. A ruler and a stapler, to be precise. The sub-text is plainly that these workplace implements are part of the avaricious forecloser's quiver. These weapons take away homes and destroy lives as surely as devastating weapons of war do.

Drag Me to Hell also points to the hypocrisy of the high-minded who have never suffered desperation themselves. For example, Christine counts herself an enlightened person with a certain set of bedrock values, but when she's faced with an unstoppable demon seeking spiritual foreclosure, the first thing to go are those values. She actually sacrifices a small animal, a kitten according to the tenets of a book called *Animal Sacrifices in the Service of Deities*.

Later, Christine is given the chance to "transfer" her destiny of doom (being dragged to Hell) to an innocent victim, and it's a cooking of the books she contemplates for a good long time. She will cheat to save her soul, As, I might add, *any of us would likely do in that situation*. What's clever about this scenario is that Christine is indeed our surrogate. She's us, and her plight makes us empathize for those who are desperate. Radiant and resourceful, Christine is not a villain: she's somebody who tried to get ahead in a morally bankrupt system without weighing the possible cost.

Despite the clear Great Recession sub-text, *Drag Me to Hell* is never preachy. On the contrary, it's a fever-pitched hoot from start to finish, with Raimi pulling out every trick in the book to keep the audience off-kilter and uncomfortable. He literally sweeps the audience from scene to scene with his unconventional visual transitions and sound-bridges, and expertly adopts a Godard-esque series of jump cuts at one point to help us understand how it "feels" to be in Christine's "fractured" shoes, a display of technical empathy, perhaps.

Raimi is a veteran filmmaker whose compositions are so adroit that he can literally make clattering pots and pans terrifying. He's a magician with a bizarre bag of tricks that conventional horror film directors would be too timid or too afraid to deploy in a mainstream release.

A talking goat? A malevolent handkerchief? A set of goopy dentures? A pesky fly that not just lands on your cheek, but crawls up your nostrils, goes down your throat, and gets spit up during a formal dinner?

It's an outrageous style and a mode that darts brilliantly between terror and madness. Yet despite the occasional Three Stooges approach, this movie is not un-serious or inconsequential.

On the contrary, Raimi's film may leave you shrieking with its screaming sense of finality. *Drag Me to Hell's* valedictory moment is so stunning, so brassy, so utterly irrevocable that you could very well find yourself in a kind of paralytic shock after watching it. The film's ending card (in **HUGE** letters) comes up before you can fully process the terror, before you can even exhale. This is the cinematic

equivalent of slamming the door in our faces, an act which will rattle and shake you. And when you're alone in the dark tonight, weighing the movie, intellect alone won't keep away the shivers. Instead, that last moment—and all it portends—will haunt you.

Christine, whom many of us would consider an innocent but who knowingly participated in a corrupt system, gets dragged to Hell.

Again, this is the decade of *The Grudge*, and *The Ring* too, when guilt is assessed not necessarily by an evil act, but by witnessing evil, and doing nothing to stop it.

Drag Me to Hell asks the very pertinent question, paraphrased from a bank's TV commercial: *What do you have in your (spiritual) wallet?*

Evil Things * * *

Critical Reception

"The deceptively simple DIY style of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) has spawned countless imitators in the years since it became a runaway success. Filmmakers both amateur and professional alike have had a go at found footage, rendering it one of the most formulaic subgenres in all of horror. All one needs to create some P.O.V. horror, the glut of P.O.V. movies tells us, is a camera, some friends (or actors), and a dream.

The very indie, very low budget *Evil Things* melds the standard slasher movie setup with found footage tropes and leans comfortably into a setup as old as time: Five teenage friends head out of town to an isolated location for a weekend of partying only to find themselves stalked by an unseen killer. One of them is an aspiring filmmaker and ignores his friends' pleas to 'put the camera down.' He documents the city-to-country car ride, their evening of lite debauchery, and every teary breakdown they have as their numbers dwindle. In other words, it brings just about zilch to the table that's new or groundbreaking. For better or worse, *Evil Things* is strictly by-the-numbers found footage, from its lengthy, chatter-filled setup to its 'no, really, this all happened and the FBI needs your help to find these youths' framing narrative conceit, and it isn't going to win the subgenre any new fans.

I am a total found footage apologist. I'll gladly indulge in nearly any offering in the subgenre, no matter how rote or trite. I can confidently say that *Evil Things* isn't anything I haven't seen before, often done to greater effect, dozens of times. And yet this little movie has a certain cynicism-free charm that its genre brethren nearly always lacks, one that gets me recommending it to my fellow P.O.V. aficionados. Maybe it's the group at its core, who don't feel like they've recently stepped out of Central Casting. They've got braces and spots and tiny purple backpacks just like any average student, and for once a horror movie group of friends feels like actual friends. I found the time they spent together eminently watchable, even if it wasn't necessarily a cinematic thrill. Maybe it was the slasher angle, which was a bit refreshing in a subgenre full of hauntings. It could be that I'm simply a sucker for the inherent creepiness of an isolated house in a dark, quiet, snowy wood. Whatever it is, I can't help but enjoy *Evil Things* and root for the doomed cast, even against my better judgement."—Stacie Ponder, horror scholar and blogger.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Laurel Casillo (Cassy); Morgan Hooper (Mark); Torrey Weiss (Tanya); Ryan Maslyn (Leo); Elyssa Mersdorf (Miriam); Gail Cadden (Aunt Gail).

CREW: Inception Media Group, Go Show Media present *Evil Things*. Casting: Mario Valdez Steckler. Cinematography: Laurel Casillo, Moran Hooper, Ryan Maslyn, Elyssa Mersdorf, Dominic Perez, Mario Valdez Steckler, Torrey Weiss. Film Editor: Dominic Perez. Producers: Dominic Perez, Mario Valdez Steckler. Written and Directed by: Dominic Perez. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: For Miriam's (Mersdorf) birthday, she invites four friends to spend the weekend with her at her Aunt Gail's house in the snowy Catskills. The group of young adults, including Leo (Maslyn), Tanya (Weiss), Mark (Hooper) and Cassy (Casillo), begin the car ride, but on the road, are harassed, inexplicably, by a red van. The van pursues the group on their journey, and even to a stop at a diner. Once the group gets to the house, the van seems to be gone. The next day, the group gets lost in the

woods. When it returns home, it finds itself harassed again by an unseen stalker, first in terms of strange phone calls, and then by the arrival of a videotape, wrapped in brown paper, that shows they have been observed all weekend long by the unseen assailant. That night, the stalker enters the house and attacks.

COMMENTARY: *Evil Things* is a terrific and effective found footage horror movie. A low-budget effort, the movie captures beautifully the zeitgeist of the 2000s, first by featuring a key theme of the era: the ways that technology can harm us. Secondly, *Evil Things* appears to acknowledge the growing rage in America over perceived, random slights.

The film's first act is especially effective. Five friends go on a journey on the wintry, snowy roads of New York. A seemingly random incident on the road spurs the anger of a stranger (or so it seems), and the driver of the red van takes offense for no reason. Then, beyond rage, beyond reason, the red van continues to pursue, harass, and terrorize the friends on the road.

One may draw a connection here to "road trip gone wrong" antecedents such as Spielberg's *Duel* (1972), but in this case, the red van, its scary presence and relentless returns seems to speak of a new age of ugliness in America. It is one in which a perceived slight (like a mistake on the road), becomes an opportunity to unleash pure Id. Road rage was talked about much in the 2000s, the idea of using a vehicle to exact punishment against others, on highways and streets, and *Evil Things* captures the invogue idea of the era that one wrong move while driving, and you could make an enemy bent on killing you.

Why had Americans become so angry that an innocent mistake could be cause for brutal punishment, and even murder? It isn't entirely clear, even today, but *Evil Things* captures the uncertainty Americans feel while driving sometimes, away from home, and wondering who, exactly, could be driving that large SUV, or that red van, in the next lane.

The first act evokes all these feelings, even as later acts reveal there is nothing random about the red van. This is where the film's second theme arrives. Basically, an unseen stalker uses technology to destroy the five youngsters. The phone is used to punctuate silence and jangle their nerves. The videotape is utilized to stoke paranoid terror. The camera itself aids stalking with its night vision component, giving the stalker an edge over Miriam and her friends in the impenetrable darkness. Then the final revelation, the stalker seated in his editing bay suggests that mass media is a method to pursue perverse and unwholesome concerns and hobbies.

In a decade of haunted videotapes, cell phones, websites, and video games, *Evil Things* intimates that the 21st world of technology has provided the dedicated stalker every tool he or she needs to make the lives of others a living hell.

If *Evil Things* falters at all, it is during the sequence in which the teens get lost in the snowy woods, and have difficulty finding their way home. This scene feels like a wintry *Blair Witch Project* on the cheap and doesn't conform to the movie's twin ideas of contending with hostile strangers in America, or that stranger's predatory use of technology.

But most of the time, *Evil Things* not only works, it terrifies. Perhaps it is the immediacy of the found footage format that allows the film to get under the audience's skin so effectively. Also, "non real" factors, like the zombies of *REC* or the demon of *Paranormal Activity*, are not present, meaning there is no suspension of disbelief required to enjoy the film. The actors are good enough, the camerawork is solid and often intense, and particularly in the use of night vision photography, and the premise is completely plausible, and therefore frightening.

Evil Things reaches an apex of horror as the young denizens of Aunt Gail's house separate in the darkness and are picked off, one after the other, each helplessly alone, by a dedicated predator with an edge. These moments in the dark are as intense, hopeless and fear laden as any imagery in the 2000s horror canon.

The film's final imagery, of the killer heading off to repeat his antics with a second group of youngsters, promises a found footage sequel that this critic would actually look forward to, if it were to be made.

The Final Destination * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“...the actors are as disposable as their characters, and there is no story to speak of.”—Elizabeth Weitzman, *New York Daily News*, September 1, 2009.

“On its fourth go-round, the can-we-cheat-death exercise has become flatter than its characters, and the racist redneck, arrogant jock, buxom but shallow soccer mom, and perky, easy-on-the-eyes girlfriends make for a pretty flat cast.”—Tom Meek, *Boston Phoenix*, September 3, 2009.

“Death, Be Not Boring would have been a better title...”—Cliff Doerksen, *Chicago Reader*, September 1, 2009.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Buddy Campo (Nick); Shantel VanSanten (Lori); Nick Zano (Hunt); Haley Webb (Janet); Mykelti Williamson (George); Krista Allen (Samantha); Andrew Fiscella (Mechanic); Justin Wellborn (Racist); Stephanie Honore (Mechanic's Girlfriend); Lara Grice (Racist's Wife); Jackson Walker (Cowboy).

CREW: New Line Cinema, and Practical Pictures present *The Final Destination*. Casting: Linsey Hayes Kroeger, David H. Rapaport. Production Designer: Jaymes Hinkle. Costume Designer: Claire Breau. Special Effects: Hybride, Café FX, Amalgamated Pixels, Zoic Studios, Entity FX, PIC Agency, and J.E.M. F/X. Music: Brian Tyler. Director of Photography: Glen MacPherson. Film Editing: Mark Stevens. Producer: Crig Perry, Warren Zide. Executive Producers: Richard Brener, Walter Hamada, Sheila Hanahan Taylor. Based on characters created by: Jeffrey Reddick. Written by: Eric Bress. Directed by: David R. Ellis. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: While at a race with his friends, a college student named Nick (Camp) experiences a vision depicting a terrible accident that costs both him and his friends their lives. Following the vision, Nick and his friends leave the race, and the accident occurs at the racetrack, taking several lives but sparing Nick and his cohort. In the days that follow, Death hunts down Nick, his girlfriend Lori (VanSanten), and the rest of the group to make up for the destinies changed.

COMMENTARY: The *Final Destination* horror franchise is one that truly thrived in the 2000s, with no less than four entries in ten years. One can see why the idea of the film carries such resonance in the age of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. The series spotlights the idea of Death as a formless, relentless predator, and one with an aggressive quota to meet.

Even more than that, the execution of death's agenda is frequently spectacular. In these films, Death as a kind of cosmic Rube Goldberg machine: murdering unlucky people in indirect, convoluted and labyrinthine manner. Specifically, one accident leads to another accident. And as the last domino falls, the result is that an unlucky character gets killed. The *Final Destination* film series has always been at its morbid best when talented directors stretch their imaginations to carefully stage the escalation of the accidents, creating in the process an accelerating aura of inevitability. Watching a death scene unfold in the original *Final Destination* (2000) is like watching God play Ideal Toy's classic board game, *Mouse Trap*.



Nick (Bobby Campo) attempts to save Lori (Shantel VanSanten) from the machinations of Death itself in *The Final Destination* (2009).

With people.

And heavy machinery.

The Final Destination (in 3-D no less) is perfectly positioned to thrive on that feeling: on the inevitability of death; on the relief at miraculously evading it; on the thought “*There but for the Grace of God go I.*” And the opening credits indicate that the director, David Ellis, is out to have some fun in that regard. There’s one shot in the credits of a human spinal column (seen in X-ray vision), and the camera actually *rides down it* like a roller-coaster car. That’s the movie’s central metaphor (and call-back to the third film): *The Final Destination* is a roller-coaster ride. Nothing more. It’s not a deep horror tract about social or political ideas, just a 3-D amusement park ride.

The film opens at a quasi-Nascar race, the Megatech 3000, with cars zooming about the track loudly and disaster just around the corner. Then the film introduces four insipid, interchangeable leads, Nick (Campo), his girlfriend Lori (VanSanten), and their buddies Janet (Webb) and Hunt (Zano). Nick experiences a premonition of disaster and gets his friends away from the racetrack just before there is a gory, over-the-top accident of truly apocalyptic proportions. Afterwards, Nick concludes that Death is stalking all the survivors of the accident because, well, it was cheated on that mortality quota. Nick comes up with this theory by reading old newspaper accounts of the previous *Final Destination* movies. We don’t actually see him doing the research; we just see him announcing his conclusions.

This is an early indicator that something feels rote and by-the-numbers here. The exposition about Death, for instance—and *about the way to break the chain of Death’s checklist*—actually seems lifted word-for-word from earlier franchise entries, making this screenplay feel like a rerun. Thus, we’re not riding a roller coaster for the first time; we’re really riding it for the fourth time.

And that’s a lot less fun.

All of these characters soon do stupid, stupid things in *The Final Destination*. For instance, Nick and Lori explain to Hunt and Janet in detail their theory about Death’s pursuit. So, what do Hunt and Janet do? They storm off!! They go their separate ways and totally ignore the warning. No wait: Janet is even dumber than that. She barely survives being drowned in her Scion XB in a malfunctioning car wash, and then—when informed again that death is stalking her (in a movie theater this time), she ignores the warning *a second time*. The movie also forgets to let Janet grieve over the fact that her buddy Hunt has been killed. The very next day, she and Lori are out buying sneakers at the mall.



A bloody close up of Nick (Bobby Campo), following the escalator death in *The Final Destination* (2009).

Again, a roller coaster ride is fine. But to really enjoy one, you should like the people who are riding in the car beside you. That doesn't happen here. The characters are off-the-shelf clichés, and the audience never really likes or gets to know any of them. They don't behave realistically, given the situation, and that kills the movie's verisimilitude. The specifics of this roller coaster ride are kind of disappointing in other regards. The death scenes are not nearly as elaborate or as creative as in the previous entries. The scenes don't build and build the way they did in the original film. Remember the roadway pile-up in *Final Destination 2*. There's nothing here that can compete with that bravura sequence.

Even the 3-D isn't very good. For the record, the myriad 3-D objects hurled at the camera during these 82 minutes look artificial; very CGI-style. They just don't appear real, and that fact makes this roller-coaster less fun than it should be as well.

Without characters to identify with; without death scenes that really rattle you or get your blood going, *The Final Destination* degenerates into a movie about one thing: people dying in the equivalent of really bad industrial accidents.

In one of *The Final Destination*'s more absurd sequences, coffee spills on a newspaper and obligingly highlights the message "*break the chain*." That's also good advice to the makers of this very 2000s franchise, but I'll type it out with my keyboard instead of creating it by dropping a hot beverage:

Give this movie franchise a rest until some new ideas come along.

Break the chain.

The Fourth Kind * * *

Critical Reception

"...the cinematic version of a chain e-mail hoax: Take a story with a basis in truth—a rash of well-publicized, FBI-investigated disappearances in the remote Alaskan town of Nome—and throw in a fantastic twist from just at the fringe of believability. (Aliens kidnapped them!) Now corroborate your story with a fabricated but seemingly authoritative witness (psychologist Abigail Tyler, played by Jovovich in those re-enactments and by an unnamed actress as the 'real' doctor in the 'archival' footage). All that's left is to arrange for the message to be delivered by a trusted source: your aunt, maybe, or your office mate. Or, in this case, a movie star."—Ian Buckwalter, *NPR*: "*Fourth Kind*: She Can See Aliens From Her House," November 5, 2009.

"...an instant frontrunner for Razzie consideration with its absurdly silly storyline, truly horrific performances across the board, overwhelming dependence on hand-held cinematography and what may very well qualify as the year's worst original score."—Richard Propes, *The Independent Critic*, September 8, 2009.

"Writer-director Olatunde Osunsanmi wants you to believe that everything he shows you that's not reenacted by professionals *really happened* and is documented by the omnipresent video cameras. It's a device used far more successfully in *Paranormal Activity*, which had the added benefit of being a good movie. The real touchstones here are the "documentaries" about psychic phenomena on the "History" Channel, and of the *Alien Autopsy* fraudumentary that Fox ran a few times to high ratings in 1995. All of these mix reenactments with grainy, blurry purportedly true footage, and score neither as science nor as entertainment."—Richard Corliss, *Time Magazine*, November 6, 2009.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Milla Jovovich (Dr. Abigail Tyler/Herself); Will Patton (Sheriff August); Hakeem Kae-Kazem (Awolowa Odusami); Corey Johnson (Tommy Fisher); Enzo Cilenti (Scott Stracinsky); Elias Koteas (Abel Campos); Eric Loren (Deputy Ryan); Mia McKenna-Bruce (Ashley Tyler); Raphael Coleman (Ronnie Tyler); Daphne Alexander (Theresa); Alisha Seaton (Cindy Stracinski); Tyne Rafaeli (Sarah Fisher); Paul Stefanov (Timothy Fisher); Kiera McMaster (Joe Fisher); Sara Houghton (Jessica).

CREW: Universal Pictures, Gold Circle Films, Chambara Pictures, Dead Crow Pictures, in association with

Saga Films, Focus Films and Third Kind Productions, presents *The Fourth Kind*. Casting: Sue Jones. Production Designer: Carlos Da Silva. Costume Designer: Johnetta Boone. Special Effects: Plowman, Craven & Associates. Music: Atli Orvarsson. Director of Photography: Lorenzo Senatore. Film Editor: Paul J. Covington. Producer: Paul Brooks, Joe Carnahan, Terry Lee Robbins. Executive Producers: Jenna A. Miller, Scott Niemeyer, Norm Waitt. Story by: Terry Lee Robbins, Olatunde Osunsansmi. Directed by: Olatunde Osunsansmi. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Nome, Alaska, Dr. Abigail Tyler (Jovovich) investigates a long history of alien abductions in the town. The mystery of these abductions goes back decades, and Dr. Tyler explores hypnosis and other techniques to get at the truth of the strange phenomenon.

COMMENTARY: In terms of UFO stories, there is this strange tradition in the modern cinema of the *pseudo-documentary*: a film that mixes stock footage of purported flying saucer sightings with newly filmed, “dramatized” material. For three decades, the “real” and the staged have been mixed in movie ventures including *Target: Earth*, a film which featured actor Victor Buono playing an alien, plus real scientists including Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov. The 1970s and early 1980s truly represented the heyday of UFO pseudo-documentary explorations like that, including *UFOs: It Has Begun* (1976), *UFOs are Real* (1979), *UFO-Exclusive* (1979) and *UFO Syndrome* (1981). In the same decade, there were also a number of pseudo-documentaries pursuing author Erich von Däniken’s popular hypothesis about “ancient astronauts” visiting man in pre-history, the whole *Chariot of the Gods* (1970)/*In Search of Ancient Astronauts* (1973) approach.

Surprisingly, the year 2000 brought a dedicated revival of these “alien encounter” formats with a new twist, director Olatunde Osunsansmi’s horror effort *The Fourth Kind*. Here, the filmmakers have also adopted *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity*’s (2009) marketing scheme: selling their genre film as being entirely based on fact.

The truth, of course, is that all the “*authentic archival footage*” featured throughout the film, captured by police cameras, home video cameras and other sources is *staged*; prepared exclusively for this movie. Like the first-person camera approach of *Paranormal Activity*, this conceit is designed specifically to scare viewers, to make audiences believe that what it is witnessing is authentic.

The underlying conceit here is incredibly interesting, if a little complex. Director Osunsansmi employs split-screens on several occasions to place purportedly “real” archival footage (say of a police hostage situation on a front porch, side-by-side with his staged representation/re-enactments of the same moments.) The trick, of course, is that *both* incidents are staged for the film; both are faked. Yet placed side-by-side in one frame—with *one heightened artificial image reinforcing the authenticity of the other*—audiences are asked to seek out the visual differences between grainy home video and apparent Hollywood confabulation.

In this hunt, our eyes conclude that the home video is realistic, and actually buy into that false footage as being truthful. In other words, Osunsansmi deliberately deploys slightly exaggerated Hollywood artifice to make us believe in the veracity of the cheap, home video material.

And he’s largely successful in his clever game too.

Indoctrinated in everything from *America’s Funniest Home Videos* to *Cops* to *World’s Wildest Police Videos*, modern TV and film viewers have come to instinctively trust the shaky, grainy, cheap approach to filmmaking, and, oppositely, inherently *distrust* the more accomplished, romantic, Hollywood approach. The latter is exemplified here by the presence of movie star Milla Jovovich in the lead role of Dr. Abigail Tyler, a woman who uncovers a rash of alien abductions in Nome, Alaska, during the first five days of October in 2000. Modern audiences crave and subscribe to naturalism in films these days, eschewing artifice and theatricality as much as possible. This movie encourages that impulse; asking the audience to reject the artifice of the Jovovich dramatizations and believe the naturalism (the lie) of the 911 tapes, the police camera videos, the home video sources, and so forth.

Case in point: our main character. *The Fourth Kind* also presents another woman as the real Dr. Abigail Tyler, and let's just say, to paraphrase Wes Craven's *Scream*, she's no Milla Jovovich.

Presented in an archival video "interview" from Chapman University (with director Osunsanmi, no less), we come to believe this unglamorous woman as "*the real thing*" because she is awkward, halting, relatively unattractive, and distinctly un-movie star-like. Of course, she's an actress made to appear that way. This is where the movie proves genuinely smart. The "staged" re-enactment of scenes features the lovely Jovovich looking great and sexy in her stylish wardrobe, playing out hypnosis regression scenes against backgrounds that are more romantic, *more affluent* than what we see in the home video.

Osunsanmi deliberately plays up the exaggerated production design in these sequences. They are an artist's *heightened* version of reality and audiences detect that fakery. Thus, the documentary footage, lensed in less elaborate, less-stylish surroundings seem increasingly real. The supposedly "documentary," archival footage moments deploy available light, less attractive actors than Hollywood would permit, poorer sound, and more naturalistic blocking and camera work. People step out of frame. The blocking cuts off heads during shots, action occurs off-screen, at the corners of perception, etc.

It takes about twenty-three minutes or so for the brain to get accommodated to *The Fourth Kind*'s fashion of operating, and audiences must endure a cheesy opening by Jovovich, directly addressing the audience. She comes out of a blurry fog, as if awakening from a dream, and breaks the fourth wall. *But here's the thing*: we must remember that this is all part of the format and genre (the UFO pseudo-documentary) too. Hollywood "stars," often slumming it, in need of a paycheck were always asked to front this goofball stuff with all sincerity and pomposity, whether it was Jose Ferrer, Burgess Meredith or Rod Serling.

And Osunsanmi is skilled even at excavating the right visuals in the movie's re-enactments too. He forges a scintillating sense of uneasiness and scope with the first shots of Tyler arriving in picturesque Nome, an isolated town that can only be reached by airplane. You get the impression from Tyler's flight over Nome—an *outcropping of human technology and community blanketed on all sides by green mountain ranges*—that the town is the perfect "test tube" environment for alien abduction and experimentation. And no one has to say a word about that idea for it to carry thematic currency.

Occasionally, the movie missteps, no doubt. Early on, there's a crisply edited montage of hypnosis sequences featuring three of Tyler's clients as they all discuss exactly the same thing: a menacing white owl watching them from their bedroom windows. The montage, a time-saving measure, actually deprives us of Abigail's "learning curve." It's the wrong technique for the sequence because the audience should *gradually* learn that all of her insomniac clients have experienced an identical terror. The presence of the owls actually a mnemonic avatar for the extra-terrestrials. And the audience should see this unnerving truth dawn on Abigail slowly too. Instead, by cutting between three separate hypnosis sessions at lightning speed, there's no graduation of suspense, no escalation of terror. It's one of the few scenes in the movie that absolutely doesn't work.

Yet what does work, actually, is Osunsanmi's "documentary"-style footage, which—at about the forty-five-minute point—kicks off into absolute horror when two patients, named Tommy (Johnson) and Scott (Cilenti) are regressed to the time of their alien abductions. These actors, and the ones in the side-by-side "documentary scenes" featured in split-screen do an absolutely amazing job of expressing terror, using only their body movements to carry the scares. You actually believe they are experiencing alien-generated seizures or spasms.

And then, later, the film cuts to archival footage of Scott actually being "possessed" by an alien and the static-ridden, rolling video footage provides a psychic jolt. Against your better judgment, you may feel frightened or at least unnerved, and it is because of Osunsanmi's conceit of pitting the documentary-style faked stuff against the Hollywood-style faked stuff.

Especially admirable too is the way that the film attempts to bring in the *Chariot of the Gods* aspect of the form, by explicitly referencing Sumerian cuneiform and artwork. Again, some people may claim that this subplot is a real stretch in believability, that ancient astronauts or aliens formed our race's perception of God, but the movie is working in a specific genre and therefore must abide by the rules of

that genre.

By and large, critics absolutely hated *The Fourth Kind*. There are two important reasons for this, and they have nothing to do with the film's technical skill.

The first is that many modern journalists/critics may not be familiar with the style and history of the UFO pseudo-documentaries of the 1970s, and thus don't understand the genre the film is deliberately and delicately aping. They have no idea that this is an updating of a historical movie form. Therefore, they have no way to put *The Fourth Kind* into a meaningful context for their readers.

And secondly—by and large—critics really, *really* don't like to be tricked or out-smarted by movies. They don't want to admit, essentially, that a movie has gotten one over on them. This is why they all watch M. Night Shyamalan movies obsessed with picking apart a so-called trick ending, whether there is one or not. It is much easier to belittle or dismiss that which they don't "get."

For example, many critics found the "dramatizations" of *The Fourth Kind* to be cumbersome, and the Hollywood scenes over-designed. Yet this is the crux of the issue; it's the point of the movie.

It's a leitmotif.

The Fourth Kind encourages our eyes to note the unrealistic, romantic affluence of Abigail's surroundings, so typical of Hollywood movies since at least the 1990s, and then note, in side-by-side comparison, the relative naturalism of the archival, supposedly-documentary footage. In that distance between staged, A-movie re-enactment and direct cinema-style documentary footage, the movie pushes its viewers to believe the veracity of the latter over the former. The point is to scare us silly and, again, as a horror film, *The Fourth Kind* is effective on that front.

The Fourth Kind involves some splendid trickery and it is a good horror movie. It won't make you believe in alien abductions or UFOs, but it will scare you. The exciting thing is the fashion in which it visually generates its overarching mood of terror. Here, something as simple as an audiotape recording that starts normally and drifts off suddenly into nightmare territory is more than enough; thanks especially to the way the director laboriously sets-up and rigorously maintains his real/fake dynamic. He is aiming at something deeper too, and this is seen in the explicit comparison of the aliens to "God."

Specifically, humans deeply fear being powerless in their own lives. *The Fourth Kind* gets at that idea; how our sense of purpose, superiority and direction is undercut if there are indeed "*higher beings*" acting upon us with impunity and without mercy. Our human connections mean nothing if we're just laboratory rats. It's the same kind of horror that *The Mothman Prophecies* generated so expertly. Movies like these succeed in making the human experience, and the bounds of human knowledge, seem terribly small.

Is *The Fourth Kind*'s all-out attempt to subvert our "truth radar" just some intellectual game? Perhaps so, but in vetting this particular game, the director of *The Fourth Kind* has successfully updated a genre (the UFO pseudo-documentary) and breathed life into the mockumentary or found footage horror film.

Friday the 13th * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"...the killings are loud but artless (the *Final Destination* series set the bar very high on Rube Goldberg splatter), and even the most sadistic scenes lack conviction. You really have to screw it up to dishonor the memory of a movie as shitty as the original *Friday the 13th*. Heads should roll."—David Edelstein, *New York Magazine*: "Arbitrary Brutality," February 17, 2009.

"This re-imagining of the classic 1980 slasher movie has everything fans of the series would expect. And it's made with more care and keeps a much firmer grip on reality than most of the sequels churned out throughout the '80s.... The result is a film that feels both new and familiar—an admirable achievement, whether you're a fan of this kind of movie or not."—Greg Maki, *Star Democrat*, May 15, 2009.

"The most interesting thing about this film is that it's really not a remake of *Friday the 13th*—it's a remake of *Friday the 13th Part II* with pieces of other sequels thrown in. There was a definite attempt to make Jason scary in a Leatherface kind of way, trying to reset the stage in a post *Freddy vs. Jason* period. It's competently made. If you've never seen a *Friday the 13th* film, it might make you want to go watch some more of them. But in a series where there was seldom anything new introduced in the films, this one really had nothing new, and due to rights issues, it would be the last in the series we would see for quite a while (and still waiting).

This film feels like an oldies band you go see where none of the original members are in the lineup but they kinda sound like the original band so hey, who's got anything better to do? This was directed by the director of the 2003 *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake and written by the guys who wrote *Freddy vs. Jason*. Somebody needs to get the guy who made *Jason Lives: Friday the 13th Part VI* a call and get him to reintroduce what was fun in this franchise. As it stood in 2009, this wasn't even good as a bad movie."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jared Padalecki (Clay Miller); Danielle Panabaker (Jenna); Amanda Righetti (Whitney Miller); Travis Van Winkle (Trent); Aaron Yoo (Chewie); Derek Mears (Jason Voorhees); Jonathan Sadowski (Wade); Juliana Guill (Bree); Ben Feldman (Richie); Arlen Esscarpeta (Lawrence); Ryan Hansen (Nolan); Willa Ford (Chelsea); Nick Mennell (Mike); America Olivo (Amanda); Kyle Davis (Donnie).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Paramount Pictures and Platinum Dunes presents a Crystal Lake Entertainment, a Sean S Cunningham Film, *Friday the 13th*. Casting: Lisa Fields. Production Designer: Jeremy Conway. Costume Designer: Mari-An Ceo. Special Effects: Asylum Effects. Music: Steve Jablonsky. Director of Photography: Daniel C. Pearl. Film Editor: Ken Blackwell. Producers: Michael Bay, Sean S. Cunningham, Andrew Form. Executive Producers: Walter Hamada, Guy Stodel, Brian Witten. Based on characters created by: Victor Miller. Story by: Damian Shannon, Mark Swift Mark Wheaton. Written by: Damian Shannon, Mark Swift. Directed by: Marcus Nispel. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of young adults, including Whitney Miller (Righetti), discover a secret weed crop near the old "Camp Blood," Camp Crystal Lake. They are stalked and murdered, except for Whitney, by the hulking Jason Voorhees (Mears). Sometime later, Clay (Padalecki), Whitney's brother, goes in search of the missing Whitney. He seeks the help of some vacationers near Crystal Lake, including Jenna (Panabaker), who is dating the obnoxious snob Trent (Van Winkle). Soon, Jason comes for them too, killing Jenna's friends one at a time. Clay and Jenna discover Jason's underground lair, where Whitney is being held. But now they must escape the hockey-masked murderer.

COMMENTARY: Any remake of Sean Cunningham's *Friday the 13th* mythos already has a leg up on other classic horror remakes. This may simply be because several entries in the durable slasher franchise are *already* remakes of the same story.

That story goes something like this: Young, irresponsible adults go to Camp Crystal Lake, even though they are warned not to by the town drunk. Once there, they smoke weed. They have pre-marital sex. Storm rolls in. *Killer rolls in*, usually with machete. Killer hacks up all but one of the youngsters, the insightful final girl. Killer is put down, at least temporarily, and the film ends with a plug for a sequel.



Jason (Derek Mears) grabs a victim in the 2009 remake of *Friday the 13th*.

There are, of course, variations on that theme. The killer was Mrs. Voorhees in *Friday the 13th*; Jason in *Part II*, and a Jason impostor in *Part V: A New Beginning*. Camp Crystal Lake was closed (*Friday the 13th*), turned into a camp for training counselors (*Part II*), then re-named and re-opened (*Part VI*), and so forth.

Jason went to Hell. Jason went to space. Jason battled Freddy.

But basically, the audience always knew that it was going to get its money's worth with the original *Friday the 13* films. Viewers would see all the stock high-school characters again: the jock, the bitch, the geek/nerd/stoner and the Final Girl, who would battle it out heroically with the invincible killer. The audience would get the reiteration of conservative morality, the *vice-precedes-slice-and-dice* paradigm, *the sting in the tail/tale* and the *coup de grace*.

In some ways, the original films benefited from low expectations too.



He cuts an imposing figure. Jason Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* (2009).

By slavishly repeating the same tale and stock characters time in and time out, fans were conditioned not to expect anything original or surprising. And yet, some of the original films *did* manage to carve out unique territory, usually through gimmickry like 3-D, a humorous, self-mocking slant (*Jason Lives!*), or even the surprise addition of the supernatural (*The New Blood*).

But a contemporary remake of the *Friday the 13th* mythos promised, among other potential glories, the chance to stitch together something better and more cohesively than in the lumpy, patchwork continuity of the scattershot *Friday the 13th* films. Those old movies swerved merrily from narrative contradiction to narrative contradiction.

For example, Jason was revenging his dead mother, who had been revenging her dead son, Jason.

Those movies also took three entries to establish the iconic look for Jason, the hockey mask. In the later years, those movies even veered like a drunken sailor from Toronto—er, I mean Manhattan—to the depths of outer space. By the 1990s, and the body-hopping *Jason Goes to Hell*, the whiff of desperation and creative exhaustion was all over the *Friday the 13th* movies.

With benefit of almost thirty years of reflection, a good *remaker* was in the enviable position to stand back, analyze, and adopt all that was good about the *Friday the 13th* film series while discarding the bad and the stupid.

So, a remake might really be that rare thing in the re-imagination sweepstakes: *a win-win*.

Indeed, there are many aspects to this 2009 film that are highly commendable, and worthwhile. Marcus Nispel directs this new *Friday the 13th* movie, as a kind of “Unified Theory” of *Friday the 13th* narratives, basically picking all the best moments from the long-lived saga and recycling them with at least a modicum of flair. For example, Nispel’s film repeats the Jason bursting-through-window-shot from the climax of *Part II*, and the Jason-jumps-out-of-the-water jolt from the 1980 original. He also reiterates Jason’s Mother Fixation from *Part II*, re-stages the Mrs. Voorhees decapitation from the 1980 film, and he even revives the Jason-hunter/sister-seeker character from *The Final Chapter*, in Padalecki’s questing brother character. The film also features the potato sack mask replaced by the hockey mask, an event that originally happened in *Part 3D*.



Machete Man: Jason attacks in *Friday the 13th* (2009).

These elements all existed before, but are more compelling in one story, and as bedrock elements of Jason's myth.

The few new elements tend to work well too. These include a last-minute switcheroo about the identity of the Final Girl that left this author surprised, and a peek at Jason's underworld, his lair beneath Camp Crystal Lake. This expansive underground locale explains, at least a little, how Jason can believably be everywhere, very quickly, in time to murder misbehaving teenagers. The film also provides the specter of a fast-moving, ultra-aggressive Jason, instead of the slow, trudging, zombie-like Jason that audiences have come to be familiar with.

The franchise also gets a reboot and update for the 2000s with much more graphic sex scenes, and references to weed. Here, two sex scenes occur, one in the prologue in a tent, and one later, in the cabin, and these scenes are more graphic and, well, let's say energetic, than those seen previously in the series. Weed has always been an element of the *Friday the 13th* equation, but here a secret weed crop is the object of a quest, of the campers at the beginning of the film. It is, intriguingly, guarded by Jason. So, he still remains the avatar of punishment, doling out death to those who partake of sex and drugs.

Characterization is a stumbling block, but again, how important is that, really, in *A Friday the 13th* film? This author was not expecting the characters to be believable or identifiable people, and indeed they aren't. They are the same high school stereotypes that have populated these *Friday* films for decades, given to endless drinking games and topless water sports. A mean bitch screws her best friend's boyfriend without a second thought, Rich, asshole jocks believe that they're better than everyone else by reason of family legacy and wealth; and harmless "supporting" minorities (Asians and Blacks) smoke weed and dream about screwing the rich kid's girl before wandering face first into buzz-saws, screwdrivers or other destructive implements.

In terms of deeper meaning beyond the conservative *transgression results in retribution* chestnut, there isn't one here. Immoral behavior results in skewering, impaling, and arrows-through-the-head. The stuck-up Jock gets what's coming to him. So does the boyfriend-stealing young lady. All this feels formulaic, but again, consider the remake paradigm. The idea is to change things up, modernize, but also give audiences the self-same brand they liked before. That trick was managed far more adroitly in Nispel's *Chainsaw*, and also more challengingly in *Zombie's* controversial *Halloween*.

In some ways, this feels like a "best of" compilation of *Friday the 13th* moments, and if the purpose is to introduce a new generation to Jason, perhaps that is fine. But *Friday the 13th's* narrative is a colossal dead zone in terms of originality. This 2009 film eats up time but squanders it. It is brutal, but not bruising.

The thrill, alas, is largely gone.

One ingredient this author hoped the remake would retain is the acknowledgment that the sturdy slasher form—for all its *ritualistic repetition*—can still eke out a few simple scares, still galvanize the blood. With the right director at the helm, our blood—and Jason's blood—could surely pump anew, could surely be stirred.

After all, these modern campfire stories survive for a reason. They address our fear of the dark woods, or our subconscious need in a "safe" law-enforced society to face down predators. They even speak to our belief that those who transgress against us will pay for their wrongs, and that those who are resourceful, brave, and moral will survive and endure.

In the final analysis, there are mainly two significant ways in which this *Friday the 13th* updates the franchise mythos for the 21st century.

First, genuflecting to a cinematic epoch in which commerce is more important than entertainment, the discussion around a creepy campfire here focuses not so much on Jason and his legend, but rather on explicit product placement and beer brands. (Heineken or Pabst?)

And secondly, the very first breasts unveiled on screen are *fake*. They are egregiously phony, as enhanced and artificial as Jason's disfiguring make-up. Some of us are old enough to remember the days when the tits were real, and so was the titillation.

In the final analysis, this remake is clearly a lot better than *Part 3 in 3D* (1982), *A New Beginning* (1985), *Jason Takes Manhattan* (1988), and *Jason Goes to Hell* (1993). It lacks the nutty, low budget/high-

energy vibe of *Jason Lives* (1986), *A New Blood* (1988), and *Jason X* (2000), but clearly features superior production values to all three. The remake also lacks the sheer anarchic terror of the 1980 original and its first sequel, as well as that of *The Final Chapter* (1984), even while combining elements of all three into a more coherent, and therefore commendable, storyline.

For some, the expectations will be low, and this *Friday* remake will rate high.

For others, who wish to recapture the magic of a franchise from their youth, the film will feel like a mixed bag. The superior production values here reveal, perhaps, the very thinness of Jason as a character, and of his surrounding world.

Maybe these films, without a significant re-think, can really exist only in the relative “innocence” of the early Reagan Era.

From Within (DTV) * * 1/2

Cast & Crew

CAST: Elizabeth Rice (Lindsay); Thomas Dekker (Aidan); Kelly Blatz (Dylan); Laura Allen (Trish); Adam Goldberg (Roy); Margo Harshman (Sadie); Rumer Willis (Natalie); Britt Robertson (Claire); Steven Culp (Pastor Joe); Jared Harris (Bernard); Amanda Babin (Molly); Candace Scholz (Mary).

CREW: After Dark Films, and Burgundy Films present *From Within*. Casting: Emily Schweber. Costume Designer: Derek Sullivan. Production Designer: Susan Kessel. Special Effects: Atomic Arts, Furious FX. Music: Jason Cooper, Oliver Kraus. Director of Photography: Rafael Sanchez. Film Editor: Michael Matzdorff. Producers: Adrian Dylan Butchart, Chris Gibbin. Executive Producers: John Moshay, Bumble Ward. Written by: Brad Koepe. Directed by: Phedon Papamichael. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A rash of unexpected, apparent suicides in a sleepy town seem to be the result of a demonic presence. Rebellious teenager Lindsay (Rice) befriends Aidan (Dekker), an individual whom the town believes to be a Satanist, though he denies the charge. The victims of the demonic force, meanwhile, are confronted by evil doppelgangers. As the plague of suicides continues to spread, Aidan reveals to Lindsay what he knows of the dark magic behind the curse.

COMMENTARY: Sadly, *From Within* is just another unsatisfactory teen witchcraft/demon movie in a decade rife with unsatisfactory teen witchcraft/demon movies like *The Covenant* (2006), or *The Woods* (2006). This effort is darker, perhaps than the former effort, but just as muddled and slow-going as the latter affair. While some scenes are shot with real aplomb and terror, overall the movie feels like it is marching on a pre-programmed course, on, essentially, autopilot.

Some scenes and moments in *From Within* are worth highlighting. For instance, there is a terrifying sequence here, featuring Jared Harris as a local shopkeeper. He turns off the lights in his clothing store, and spots a shadow in the dark, in a room of mannequins. The scene plays expertly on our universal fear of the dark, and also of figures like mannequins which seem to be alive but possess no life. Shot and edited with skill and a dedicated eye for terror, sequences such as this set-piece grant the viewer hope that *From Within* will do something new with its story or deliver the kind of electric jolt horror fans long for.

Alas, not much materializes on either front.

This is a shame, because the movie seeks to make a powerful case about religion, and it is one related, at least tangentially, to the events and personalities of the 2000s. One character in the action, Roy, trenchantly notes “*My work here tonight is God’s work. I’m an instrument of his will. My hands are his.*”

This delusion, this belief based on vanity, is one of the key threats to the survival of mankind in the first decade of the 21st century. The men who attacked the United States on 9/11/01 believed that they were God's hand, and that they acted according to His wishes. These terrorists killed 3,000 innocent people in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania under the narcissistic delusion that the immoral choice they made was actually God's choice. They validated their murderous decision by claiming it had God's seal of approval. It is truly sickening to attempt to validate a war crime and atrocity by invoking religion and the Lord's name.

And yet, those in power in our country at the same time were not immune from similar proclamations of magical thinking. When choosing to run for President, George W. Bush reportedly made the decision not his own, but God's. He told James Robinson: *"I feel like God wants me to run for President. I can't explain it, but I sense my country is going to need me. Something is going to happen.... I know it won't be easy on me or my family, but God wants me to do it."*³⁵

Again, instead of taking responsibility for running for high office himself, Bush claimed support from someone (God Almighty) who couldn't be queried or asked about that support. Yet Bush trumpeted it and claimed that support, nonetheless.

This is self-righteous presumption.

"The potentially dangerous implication is that since God put George W. Bush in the White House, opposing him is opposing Him. A person could get smited for that," noted Slate's Steven Waldman.³⁶ Bush's claim, essentially, that God picked him, also makes it difficult to make the case that the terrorists are wrong for believing they are God's chosen. America's president and his administration made the same claims regularly (see: Jerry Boykin).

However, the bottom line is that God has remained silent on his or her selections for president, even as many politicians are eager to claim they have the Almighty's endorsement. The problem of course is that if you believe God is on your side, you can rationalize any behavior.

Murder.

War.

Not wearing a mask in a pandemic.

It all becomes so easy once the delusion is in place.

In its own awkward, teeny-bopper way, *From Within* gets at the futility of trying to anticipate what a Divine force seeks or wants. In the end, a sacrifice is made, or is it? But the act ultimately changes nothing of significance. A character has committed murder to please the Deity, and that act has real world impact. A life is taken.

From Within sees that such acts go to the highest individuals in the nation. The film has many appearances of American flags, and even a refrigerator magnet that reads *"proud to be an American."* It's a country where—when we go to war or elect a president—elected officials say that God made the decision, that the decision has God's blessing. How arrogant is that to claim? One has to wonder how God, if he or she exists, feels about constantly being invoked for choices like this, when the Divine has apparently given us free will to make our own decisions. It's sort of a cop-out to run for president, or launch a war, and then point the finger at God as "the decider."

So *From Within* certainly looks within, at our country's system of belief, and delusion, but it doesn't do so in any kind of consistent way, or that makes the film more than a mildly interesting horror picture.

*The Grudge 3 (DTV) * ½*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Matthew Knight (Jake); Shawnee Smith (Sullivan); Mike Straub (Orderly); Aiko Horiuchi (Kayako); Shimba Tsuchiya (Toshio); Emi Ikehata (Naoko); Takatsuna Mukai (Daisuke); Johanna Braddy (Lisa); Beau

Mircoff (Andy); Jodie Hobson (Rose); Marina Sirtis (Gretchen); Gil Kenney (Max); Laura Glosch (Renee); Mihaela Nankova (Brenda); Michael McCoy (Praski).

CREW: Stage 6 Films and Ghost House Films present *The Grudge 3*. Casting: Sunday Boling, Meg Morman. Production Designer: Bobi Michaelovski. Costume Designer: Maria Mladenova. Special Effects: Framework Studio, HTV. Music: Sean McMahon. Director of Photography: Anton Bakaraski. Film Editor: John Quinn. Producers: Andrew Pfeffer. Executive Producers: Doug Davison, Takashi Shimizu, Jr. Young. Based on *The Grudge*, Written by: Takashi Shimizu. Written by: Brad Keene. Directed by: Toby Wilkins. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Jake (Knight), the only survivor of Kayako's (Horiuchi) curse, dies by her hand at a low-rent Chicago apartment. Meanwhile, the landlords of the apartment must contend with the curse as Kayako takes more victims, including a painter named Gretchen (Sirtis), and another denizen named Sullivan (Smith). In this case, Toshio (Tsuchiya), the little boy spirit, haunts a little girl, Rose, a chronically sick eight-year-old.

COMMENTARY: The dialogue in the direct-to-video *The Grudge 3* promises that “if you follow it from the beginning, it's all connected,” a promise that leads right back to *The Grudge* from the early part of the decade. Unfortunately, *The Grudge 3* breaks that compact with the audience and is a slow-moving, uneventful wreck of a picture that boasts little in common with its far-better predecessors. Here, Kayako and Toshio return to wreak havoc in a slummy apartment building in Chicago, but the complexity of structure evident in the previous franchise films is forgotten. Those films winded through time and were a wonderful challenge to put together.

Instead, this sequel plays like a bad *Friday the 13th* sequel, as Kayako simply and straightforwardly goes through the denizens of the apartment with no rhyme or reason and obeying no particular rules of behavior. She might as well be a slasher killer. The fact that Kayako cannot be stopped or even combatted also lends a kind of oppressive feeling of hopelessness to the film, but not the good, intentional kind of hopelessness.

Instead, the fear here is that *The Grudge* series will just go on forever, with the curse spreading, and no new ground will be tread. Perhaps the film could have dealt meaningfully with life in a Chicago apartment that is distinctly lower class. Kayako could have been a manifestation of poverty, then, working her way through people who felt trapped in their environs.

None of that subtext is present. Instead, the film is apartment-bound throughout its run, not to suggest claustrophobia or entrapment, but likely to save money.

The horror scenes in *The Grudge 3* seem oddly abrupt and unfinished, and some of the dialogue feels way off. Marina Sirtis of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994) plays a painter who lives in the apartment building, and after she is killed by Kayako, a mother notes to her child, “Gretchen was old. Old people die.” Marina Sirtis is hardly old in this picture, so the dialogue doesn't even reflect reality. Even if she is older, she looks fantastic, and is quite vibrant. So again, it's like the script doesn't match the casting.

The great idea that *The Grudge* initiated in horror cinema, or at least contributed to, in the 2000s was the idea of rage touching everybody who got near it, even those who had not caused it or generated it in the first place. In *The Grudge 3*, Kayako is just a standard boogeyman, or boogey-person, killing people and the idea is lost. Shorn of *The Grudge's* trademark jumping from story to story, and through time, the franchise and its monster no longer seem special, or distinctive.

What's worse is that she seems to have no rules. Brenda, a traumatized girl, dies in a bathtub, and her body disappears. How does Kayako manage this trick? In the past, her victim bodies have not vanished from reality. No real thought is given to how Kayako operates in our world and so the plan to stop her, involving a ritual and the drinking of blood, seems to come out of nowhere, and have no hope of success.

And it doesn't. The film ends with Kayako still present, ready for the next sequel, apparently. "It's the past! And the past can't hurt you!" one character tells another in this inferior sequel. The problem is that the past of *The Grudge* franchise is pretty strong, and thoughtfully rendered. In comparison, the present of *The Grudge 3* feels like a weak, slapdash present.

Halloween 2 ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Yes, it appears Zombie thinks he's made an art film in *Halloween II*—which explains the unusually long 101-minute running time in a genre to which the studios generally insist on putting an 80- or 90-minute cap."—Jim Slotek, *The London Free Press*: "Zombie's vision adds to *Halloween*," August 29, 2009, page C4.

"The horror icon loses much of his mystique through Zombie's lens, too. Once a random force-of-evil-boogeyman, now there's a backstory and an attempt to humanize, connecting him to the caterwauling Laurie as her older sibling. Myers is plagued by bizarre visions of his mother accompanied by a white horse, giving the impression that he's taking lives for a higher power. The psychoanalysis is a needless complication—slasher villains shouldn't have to be empathized with, they're much more chilling when there's no rhyme or reason to their actions, just a striking aesthetic and an unnerving musical theme (only used here right at the end)."—Simon Reynolds, *Digital Spy*: "Rob Zombie's gruesome *Halloween* sequel is a mind-numbing stab-athon," September 10, 2009.

"Like all Rob Zombie films ... steeped in violence and obscenity, but the deranged atmosphere does more to make Michael feel interesting than all the previous films—he's both a superhuman killer and a boy plainly driven by the sociological factors that turn people into sociopaths.... And because it's still about Michael Myers, it all feels epic and larger than life..."—Aja Romano, *Vox*: "*Halloween*: A complete guide to horror's quirkiest, most erratic franchise," October 19, 2018.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Scout Taylor-Compton (Laurie Strode); Sheri Moon Zombie (Deborah Myers); Malcolm McDowell (Dr. Samuel Loomis); Tyler Mane (Michael Myers); Brad Dourif (Sheriff Lee Brackett); Danielle Harris (Annie Brackett); Caroline Williams (Dr. Maple); Margot Kidder (Barbara Collier); Dayton Callie (Coroner Hooks); Octavia Spencer (Nurse Daniels); Chase Vanek (Young Michael); Richard Brake (Gary Scott); Richard Riehle (Watchman); Mary Birdsong (Nancy); Brea Grant (Mya); Howard Hesseman (Uncle Meat); Duane Whitaker (Sherman); Mark Boone, Jr. (Floyd). Weird Al Yankovic (Himself).

CREW: Dimension Films, Spectacle Entertainment Group and Trancas International Film presents *Halloween II*. Casting: Monika Mikkelsen. Production Designer: Garreth Stover. Costume Designer: Mary McLeod; Special Effects: Custom Film Effects. Music: Tyler Bates. Director of Photography: Brandon Trost. Film Editors: Glenn Garland, Joel T. Pashby. Producers: Malek Akkad, Andy Gould, Rob Zombie. Executive Producers: Andy La Marca, Matthew Stein, Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein. Written and Directed by: Rob Zombie. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Michael Myers (Mane) lives! As he wanders alone, continuing to commit murders at the behest of a hallucination of his mother (Sheri Moon Zombie), his sister and a survivor of his previous massacre, Laurie (Taylor-Compton) suffers from post-traumatic stress and spirals into alcoholism. Dr. Loomis (McDowell), meanwhile, capitalizes on his fame as Myers' psychiatrist. Michael, Laurie and Loomis come together one last time, near Haddonfield, as brutal destinies are written.

COMMENTARY: Director Rob Zombie's second *Halloween* film raises a question that nobody was dying to have answered.

Is it possible to make an absolutely brilliant horror movie that everybody despises?

His sequel to a remake, *Halloween 2* (2009), is indeed such a film. It has outraged horror enthusiasts, paying audiences, and critics around the globe. And, it will likely be reviled, and dismissed for decades to come as an anomaly in the Hollywood saga. But, is it the responsibility of art to be popular and well-liked? Or is it an artist's responsibility simply to remain true to his vision?

In short, Zombie's sequel takes the director's view of the world to what can only be described as the nth degree.

Halloween 2 is unsparing and bleak. It is hopeless and mostly light-less, if that is possible. The sequel continues the premise of the 2007 remake that the world is an irredeemable, corrupt realm that, through these very qualities, creates monsters such as Michael Myers. But this time, there are no touchstones to hold onto for the audience, in the form of re-staging of the scenes from John Carpenter's *Halloween*.



Michael Myers (Tyler Mane) has a new and ratty look in Rob Zombie's *Halloween 2* (2009).

Instead, for the first time in decades, the *Halloween* saga goes off in unexpected, and unpredictable directions.

Zombie relentlessly unwinds the *Halloween* franchise ingredients here, pulling threads and seeing what remains in the aftermath. He demythologizes all the beloved, archetypal characters in a way that is fascinating, and speaks directly to the 2000s, but in ways that infuriates fans.

Once a dogged hero, Dr. Loomis (Malcolm McDowell) is portrayed instead as a horny, exploitative fame seeker, both a fraud and a suck-up.

Similarly, Laurie Strode (Scout Taylor-Compton) isn't a heroic final girl either. Rather, she has been broken by her traumas. She is shrill, self-absorbed, mentally cracked, and teetering on the verge of violent psychosis. She is not noble, likable or heroic in any sense. She expresses every situation with the

epithet “*fuck this.*”

Even lovely, long-suffering Annie (Danielle Harris) is impatient, crass, and utterly rude in the way she expresses herself. She has a moment in the film when she is being confrontational with a helpful police officer and is so mean and nasty that you begin to wonder: *how has it come to this?* Are we a nation of anger management cases, just ready to go off on anybody at any time?

And then there's Michael. He too is systematically de-constructed by Zombie. John Carpenter made Michael not a figure of rage, but a figure of supernatural calm, “The Shape,” in the 1978 classic. Myers was human in general form but possessed of an otherworldly nature. He was, simply, the Boogeyman. Michael's nature as The Shape was confirmed by the blank, white mask behind which he hid. If Michael possessed humanity, that empty, vacant mask was a barrier separating him from it.

To express Michael's essential humanity in the universe of the remake, Zombie removes Michael's mask from most of the action and reveals him to be simply a psychotic giant with a Grizzly Adams beard.

For some *Halloween* fans, the franchise IS that Shatner mask.

To remove it almost entirely from the equation is a courageous, artistic act that supports Zombie's vision in a dynamic way.

Even that is not the end of the dismantling.

Halloween 2's eschews all nature of discussion about Michael's “monstrous” inhuman nature and gives him human, recognizable, psychological motivations. He is not driven by a Druid curse, he is driven instead, by love for his mother. In fact, Michael often hallucinates the ghost of his mother (Sheri Moon Zombie), who tells him he must unleash a “*river of blood*” to bring her back to life. He is delusional and mentally ill, and perhaps always has been. And our society bred him, through poverty, TV, rampant and cheap sexuality and, perhaps most importantly, failed authority.

In *Halloween 2*, Michael is not the Boogeyman, he is a psychotic individual who is bred by a system that has failed. The police (even as led by kindly Dourif) are portrayed as impotent in the face of a world of darkness. Psychotherapy as represented by Laurie's psychologist is dismissed as touchy-feely navel gazing. And the media just want more grist for the mill.

The result of Zombie's uncompromising vision of the world is plain.

There is not a sliver of happiness in *Halloween 2*.

Again, there no light, and no hope.

Ideas like grief, sadness, redemption, tragedy or fear are only things to be joked about on late night TV with Weird Al Yankovic. The only place Laurie finds even the barest measure of relief or happiness in *Halloween 2* is in the bottle; in alcohol consumption. When she gets falling-down drunk at a Halloween party, that is the only opportunity in which she can “let go” of the pain that dominates her existence. And even here, director Zombie doesn't grant the audience respite: he undercuts Laurie's moment of beer-induced cutting-loose by cross-cutting it with images of Michael Myers strangling one of her best friends in the back of a van.

Even when pain is made numb by booze, suffering goes on elsewhere in the world.

Again, it is not hard to connect this subplot to the 2000s, the decade of American trauma, as it attempted to recover from 9/11, the Iraq War and even Hurricane Katrina. By mid-point in the decade, pundits like Ann Coulter were dismissing the 9-11 families, who had lost loved ones, as tools for liberal propaganda, and a broken generation of soldiers were coming home from the Iraq War, to a VA system that was inefficient.

Perhaps the real reason that *Halloween 2* is so hated by so many fans is that Zombie, in some sense, exposes the audience as being part of this failing system.

He exposes us.

The *Halloween* saga is about a mass murderer, but in an entertaining way that doesn't scar those who watch his exploits. Michael's evil in the traditional films is earmarked as outside of human nature, essentially, and he is combated by strong women who are protective and courageous, whether it be Laurie Strode, Rachel Carruthers, or Jamie Lloyd. Zombie refuses to compromise and turns this franchise convention upside down.

Early in the film, his camera follows Annie—wounded by Myers—to the hospital, and watches in nauseating, realistic close-up as doctors wash, drain, sew-up and tend to her knife wounds. The scene is a document of human misery. And it goes on for several minutes.

Similarly, Michael proves not merely violent in this film, but brutally sadistic: he literally turns one victim's face into unrecognizable pulp. At times, Zombie ramps up the violence during Michael's rampages so that the very film stock itself seems to convulse and spasm with rage. It's like we're tied into Myers's pulse itself, positioned inside his rage-filled veins.

And even though, in *Halloween*, there was dialogue indicating that Michael Myers ate a dog, Zombie decides to show audiences that discomfoting feast here. He crosscuts between a scene of Dourif chowing down pizza, pretending to be a Neanderthal man, with Michael Myers ripping apart the flesh of a dead dog and eating it.

In short, the "fun" horror of *Halloween* has been replaced by a lingering, gruesome close-up view of pain, suffering and death.

And the deaths of major characters here are made to hurt. The victims are not "off-the-shelf" teenagers who possess surface values we recognize from high school. Instead, Zombie makes his audience feel genuine loss.

Exhibit A is Annie's death. He crosscuts Brackett's discovery of Annie's corpse with home movies of Annie as a happy little girl. It's a breathtaking, and enormously affecting conceit. Without a doubt, it makes audiences "feel" the impact of this death more than just about any other in the *Halloween* film cycle. Viewers understand what loss feels like for Brackett. It's heart-rending. He has lost a child. There is a reckoning, uncommon to these films that whether Michael Myers lives or dies, Brackett's life is ruined.

The horror movies of the 2000s were generally dark and disturbing, and often missing the campy humor of the 1980s and 1990s. Rob Zombie earns that seriousness in *Halloween 2*, and crafts an intellectual argument for that level of seriousness in a world of terrorist attacks, war, and economic collapse.

Specifically, Zombie stages a scene between Laurie and her psychologist in the office. On the wall behind them hangs a Rorschach poster. It is white in the center, black around the edges. Laurie is asked what she sees in it, and she replies that she sees a white horse, a reflection of Michael's vision of his mother. But if audiences gaze deeply at that Rorschach spot, there's something else the audience sees: white spots with two black "eyes."

What the audience looks at, no doubt, is a kind of Rorschach version of Michael Myers' famous Shatner mask. It is a ghostly white face upon which fear is reflected. Laurie's psychologist establishes the blot could be "*whatever you think it is*," and that remark is Zombie's road map or escape valve in choosing and executing a narrative path relevant to the 21st century. He has gazed at the Rorschach-like mask of the Shape and then written his two *Halloween* movies based on what he saw. This vision of Michael Myers is what Zombie imagined in the lines of that famous, Rorschach-like mask, a post 9/11 reckoning of a world that is failing.

Later in *Halloween 2* comes a scene in which Annie, Laurie and Sheriff Brackett share a pizza together for dinner. Brackett discusses the great actor Lee Marvin, and the actor's colorful, romantic films of the 1960s-1970s: *Cat Ballou*, *The Professionals*, *Paint Your Wagon*. The two teenagers sharing this conversation with Brackett are clueless. They don't know who Lee Marvin is; and furthermore, they don't care. That artificial world of musicals, westerns and movie decorum is as distant to them as is Ancient Latin. That's not the world they live in.

That's not the world this movie inhabits, either.

John Carpenter's *Halloween* is the Lee Marvin in this metaphor.

It is well-remembered by scholars in the older generation but something that—*Zombie suggests*—doesn't carry cultural currency or relevant meaning in the world of today's youth. Musicals are gone. Artifice is gone. Romance is gone. What exists in the 2000s is ugly, naturalistic entertainment for a world that seems to be experiencing a slow-motion collapse.

And none of this grime and darkness means that Zombie can't compose beautiful shots. There are some moments featuring Michael walking alone, by moonlight, through a nearby town that beautifully

express his isolation and outsider status.

In terms of film grammar, the film's coda, which matches "Love Hurts" and features Laurie in the hospital, synthesizes the director's vision perfectly. His universe is one of psychosis and violence, where family is at the center. The song itself is a call back to Michael's mother stripping in the first film, a reminder of where Michael started and the influences that created a mon-ster.

Finally, the question becomes: how do you like your Halloween movies?

This author prefers John Carpenter's vision, while recognizing that inferior versions of that vision like *Halloween: Resurrection* had robbed the *Halloween* universe of its visceral power. Love it or hate it, Rob Zombie's vision possesses cultural currency, and is never less than gut-wrenchingly visceral.

In Zombie's universe, hardcore, bitter reality has replaced mythic touches to produce a grounded "real" *Halloween* for our times.

It is understandable that those living in our times reject Zombie's reflection of who we are.

The Haunting in Connecticut * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"To its credit, the movie seems to understand that the primal appeal of these stories lies as much in the appearance of solemn dead people as in the possibility of domestic horrors. It's at least as scary when the son throws up from experimental radiation treatments as when, for example, people have their eyelids chopped off in flashbacks (yep). But inevitably, this foundation becomes lost in the prerogatives of a PG-13 fright flick destined for a long life on video-store shelves, a future that requires the tireless camera tricks and false scares native to low-rent horror movies."—Jeffrey Bloomer, *Paste Magazine*, March 27, 2009.

"...the meat of the movie is Hollywood at its most bogus: loud but gloomy, flashy but dull, and tailored for hyper-impatient attention spans."—Kevin Williamson, *The Recorder and Times*: "Scary truth: Haunting no horror epic," March 27, 2009, page B7.

"A preacher with a knowledge of the occult (Elias Koteas) just happens to come by. Now really, how many of us know preachers with a knowledge of the occult? In movies, there's always one right around the corner. In real life, they're probably as rare as a naked ghost *The Haunting in Connecticut* should have stayed in Connecticut."—Tom Long, *Detroit News*: "The 'boos' wear thin in *Haunting in Connecticut*," March 27, 2009, page F1.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Sara Campbell (Virginia Madsen); Kyle Gallner (Matt Campbell); Elias Koteas (The Reverend Popescu); Amanda Crew (Wendy); Martin Donovan (Peter Campbell); Sophi Knight (Mary); Ty Wood (Billy Campbell); Erik Berg (Jonah); John Bluethner (Ramsey Aickman); D.W. Brown (Dr. Brooks); John B. Lowe (Mr. Sinclair); Adriana O'Neil (Chemo Nurse); Will Woytowich (Cop); James Durham (Matt's Cell Mate).

CREW: Lionsgate, Gold Circle Films, and Integrated Films present *The Haunting in Connecticut*. Casting: Eyde Belasco. Production Designer: Alicia Keywan. Costume Designer: Meg McMillan. Special Effects: Todd Masters FX, Technicolor. Music: Robert J. Kral. Director of Photography: Adam Swica. Film Editing: Tom Elkins. Producer: Paul Brooks, Daniel Farrands, Wendy Rhoads, Andrew Trapani. Executive Producers: Scott Niemeyer, Norm Waitt, Steve Whitney. Written by: Adam Simon and Tim Metcalfe. Directed by: Peter Cornwell. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the mid-1980s, the Campbells (Madsen, Donovan) rent a new home that is close to the hospital where their terminally son, Matthew (Gallner), is being treated. The house, they learn, is a former funeral parlor. Soon, Matthew begins experiencing what could be hallucinations from his medical regimen, or what could be supernatural phenomena. As Matthew declines, his family becomes

desperate to learn more about the former occupant of the house, a man who may have practiced necromancy.

COMMENTARY: Going back decades, the haunted house sub-genre can prove a bit problematic if not treated with respect and extreme care. For one thing, it requires a particularly high threshold of believability in order to prove successful. Not in terms of the ghosts, which merely require a healthy imagination. Rather, regarding the motivations of the human characters who dwell in the house with the ghosts. In these movies the audience is always yelling at the imperiled residents of the haunted house in question to get out **NOW** and they just never, ever do.

Instead, they remain in grievous physical and spiritual danger beyond all logic, beyond all reason, beyond all sanity. After a while, the appropriate reaction is to wash your hands of these doltish homeowners. They're the horror movie equivalent of people who stand out in the rain without an umbrella and then act surprised when they get wet.

Gateway to Hell discovered in the basement (painted in Boschian red...)?

It doesn't matter. The residents stay.

A placard reading "abandon all hope, ye who enter here" hanging in your entrance way? How quaint! Now let's unpack the good china.

Of course, this is not always the case, especially in the hands of master filmmakers. There have been many great haunted house movies over the years, from Robert Wise's masterpiece, *The Haunting* (1963) to the creepy *Burnt Offerings* (1976) to the unnerving *The Changeling* (1980).

The Freeings clearly couldn't leave their spirit-infested tract home in *Poltergeist* (1982) because their daughter, Carol Anne, had been spirited to the Beyond and they had to rescue her. Nor could the Torrance family flee their haunted hotel in Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), because it was buried by a blizzard, and all the roads were closed by snow.

Heck, audiences even accept that Barbara Hershey's character, the lead in *The Entity* (1983), would have stuck around her particularly upsetting haunted house, since her ghost/tormentor was just another in a long line of "male" abusers and users in her life, and she had grown accustomed to victim hood.

Indeed, there are myriad ways in which a clever writer could keep a haunted house family in danger without it seeming like a dramatic cheat or a blatant defiance of rationality. To its credit, the 2009 horror movie, *The Haunting in Connecticut* gives it the old college try by including a protagonist—a teenager named Matthew Campbell (Kyle Gallner)—who suffers from cancer as he moves into a haunted funeral home with his family. Matt is undergoing an experimental, dangerous radiation treatment which could be causing him to experience visual hallucinations (like crabs teeming over his body). Thus, it is all too easy for Matthew's concerned family to mistake Matthew's protestations of a haunting/ghosts at home for the deleterious side-effects of his dangerous medical regimen. Hence, the family doesn't leave.

You know, I totally buy that.

But unfortunately, the movie isn't as clear on the other characters' motivations for coping with Matthew and his vulnerable condition. For instance, the matriarch of the imperiled family, Mrs. Campbell (Madsen), allows the weakened Matthew to move into a basement suite that once housed the funeral home's grisly embalming room. All the embalmer's tools, such as bone saws, scalpels, eyelid clippers, and dangerous chemicals such as acid are still there, readily available and in easy reach of children and teenagers alike. They're but one impulsive grab away, especially if your boy is living and sleeping in the adjoining room.

Is that something *you* would permit if you were caring for a possibly suicidal, possibly delusional teenager? Mrs. Campbell seems to be legitimately caring and concerned, and she complains to God about losing her son, so why should she tempt fate by moving the hallucinating boy in next to scalpels, bone saws and formalde-hyde?

Then, at the end of the film, a baffling interlude occurs. After Matthew's entire body is instantaneously covered by mysterious scalpel wounds, Mrs. Campbell shrieks at him: "*What have you*

done to yourself?"

A couple of things about that exhortation.

One: if Mom didn't want Matthew playing with sharp medical instruments, perhaps she should have insisted—*just once in any scene in the movie*—that he not move into the chamber adjoining the fully equipped embalming room. At the very least, Mrs. Campbell could have put a new lock on the door to keep the dangerous tools and chemicals out of the reach of her kids.

Secondly, at this point in the film, Mrs. Campbell has seen evidence of malevolent spirits herself, so why would she blame poor Matthew for self-mutilation *now*, when the wounds are clearly spirit-induced? At this late point, the delusion angle is no longer operative, since everyone in the house has witnessed slamming doors, arcing lights, ghostly howling, and evil shadows. At the very least, Mrs. Campbell must have doubt; doubt that things are as simple as her exclamation suggests.

The movie never truly decides if Mrs. Campbell believes in the ghosts, or just believes Matthew is hallucinating, and so she's distancing as a vehicle for audience sympathy. It looks to me as though the film was tinkered with at some relatively late stage of development to make Madsen's character more central to the action, more sympathetic, but it's at the expense of story clarity.

Despite moments like this of situational illogic and weird character motivations, *The Haunting in Connecticut* isn't as poor, perhaps, as some critics have suggested. The film features the strong conceit that those already on the edge of the death—the so-called “borderland” between life and death—could have a greater propensity to see ghosts than the healthy do. That's a fascinating idea. The performances are pretty affecting too, as the Campbells have to reckon with the impending certain death of young Matthew. Martin Donovan does a good job as the confused, alcoholic patriarch of the family. It's clear that he's just holding on, and there are some touching scenes in *The Haunting in Connecticut* that other movies wouldn't take the time to feature. Mr. Campbell has a grieving, destructive, temper tantrum in one. Another scene depicts him watching old slides of Matthew as a child and fighting back tears. These moments don't feel like ones on autopilot.

Many of the ghost sequences are effective too. One scene involving a little boy playing hide-and-seek in a dumbwaiter is downright chill inducing. The film also features some beautiful visual composition. In one sequence: a ghost “hand” looms plainly into view next to a little girl playing with a dollhouse, almost part of the scenery, at first unnoticed. It's a crossing of the borderlands.

Another sequence literally has the shadow of death hovering over Matthew as he slumbers, and that's the ultimate point of the film. Matthew is susceptible to the “Evil” here because Matthew is close to death. Accordingly, *The Haunting in Connecticut* deals more honestly with the idea of mortality than just about any American horror film of 2009 vintage. Matthew is sick. We see radiation burns on his chest after his treatments. Sometimes he can barely stand, and he's sensitive to the touch. His mother can't even hug him. Death is a fact of life for Matthew. Whenever the family discusses the future, the elephant in the room is Matthew.

He won't be around to see it. The future is meaningless to him.

There's a theory, long-standing, that poltergeist activity is caused by the turbulent emotions unleashed in adolescence. What kind of strong emotions must Matthew be feeling, and unleashing, as an adolescent reckoning with imminent death?

Ultimately, I can't recommend the film, however. *The Haunting in Connecticut* fails dramatically in a few important regards. First, it seems to be cribbing from the *Poltergeist* handbook: down to the false cleansing of the house, and then the discovery of angry corpses on the premises.

Based on a true story? How about based on a previous screenplay?

And secondly, to reiterate the point above, the film never decides how Mrs. Campbell feels about the haunting. If she believes in the ghosts—which the film's closing lines suggest—then she is a blatantly irresponsible person since she leaves her youngest children alone in the dangerous locale on more than one occasion. If she doesn't believe in the ghosts, as evidenced by her line “*what have you done to yourself?*” then what, exactly does she believe happened?

The final aspect working against the film's success is its cop-out ending. After dealing so well with Matthew's impending death, the movie takes an about face and ends on an unnecessarily miraculous,

schmaltzy note. This moment is simply a giant, dishonest, cheat.

The Haunting in Connecticut seems to battle between being “real” and wanting to be *Touched by an Angel*.

The Hills Run Red (DTV) * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Sophie Monk (Alexa); Tad Hilgenbrinck (Tyler); William Sadler (Concannon); Janet Montgomery (Serena); Alex Wyndha (Lalo); Ewan Bailey (Sonny); Danko Iordanov (Babyface); Mike Straub (Gabe); Hristo Mitzkov (Jimo); Georgi Dimitrov-Bomba (Lance); Ekaterina Temelkova (Sherri).

CREW: Warner Premiere, Dark Castle Home Entertainment and Fever Dreams, in association with Ludovico Technique presents *The Hills Run Red*. Casting: Dean E. Fronk, Gillian Hawser, Donald Paul Pemrick. Production Designer: Antonello Rubino. Costume Designer: Jasmina Vasileva-Stoichkova. Music: Frederick Wiedmann. Director of Photography: Ilan Rosenberg. Film Editor: Harold Parker. Producers: Robert Meyer Burnett, John Carchietta, Carl Morano, Roe Sharon Peled, Jonathan Tzchor. Executive Producers: Erik Olsen, Steve Richards, Joel Silver. Based on a story by: John Carchietta. Written by: John Dombrow, David J. Schw. Directed by: Dave Parker. M.P.A.A. Rating R. Running time: 81 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An obsessed film fan, Tyler (Hilgenbrinck), works on a documentary about a mysterious horror film director, Concannon (Sadler), and his lost masterpiece, *The Hills Run Red*, in hopes of seeing the only surviving print of the film. The only aspect of the film remaining is a crudely made trailer from 1982. Along with a skeleton crew, including his girlfriend, Serena (Montgomery), Tyler hunts down Concannon's daughter, Alexa (Monk), now a stripper. She leads Tyler and his team into the woods to Concannon's home, and a world of terror. Alex comes to realize that *The Hills Run Red* is a snuff film, and it is still being shot, all these years later. Worse, he and his friends are playing roles in the effort.

COMMENTARY: Although it features a sound-alike title that makes it seem like a mock-buster version of *The Hills Have Eyes*, *The Hills Run Red* is actually a well-made and intriguing horror film. It blends the “meta” or post-modern self-referential aspects of the neo slasher movement (and films such as *Scream*) with the road-trip-gone wrong and hillbilly horror paradigm of such efforts as *Wrong Turn*, or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, to mostly positive effect.

The Hills Run Red features such staples of the latter form as the Last Chance Gas Station, and the video camera that records some or all of the ongoing horror. But much more fun, and more cerebral than the regurgitation of this popular 2000s sub-genre is the film's focus on filmmaking as a kind of perverse art, one that goes hand-in-hand with violence and killing. The film's mantra or theme is spoken in the dialogue, which states “*You don't make film. You live film. You sacrifice everything for it.*”

That's precisely what the monstrous Concannon does. He has made his life—and his twisted family—into a film that never ends. He keeps shooting it, keeps revising it, with ever-more gory and monstrous scenes. As is noted at one point late in the film, “*Everybody is expendable for the good of the film.*” Indeed, the monstrous director feels the need to recast an “actor,” and he does so through murderous means, at one point.

Anyone who has directed a film or worked on one knows precisely where Concannon is coming from. At some point in the shooting of a movie, nothing else matters, beyond the realization of the director's vision, a statement also made by *Shadow of the Vampire* in 2000, and its exploration of Murnau.

Discomfort doesn't matter.

Time doesn't matter.

Family doesn't matter.

Everything is subsumed by the desire to complete the project and complete it according to the

director's vanity or need for completion/adulation/recognition as a genus. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the film is the way that this dynamic is reflected by two characters. Concannon maims and murders people to create his masterpiece, a bloody snuff film, but Tyler is also a director, and his passion and obsession leads him and his friends to be victimized by Concannon. These characters are reflections of one another, each endangering others—their own cast and crew—in the service of their art.

Or is it in slavery to their art?

The Hills Run Red genuflects to other 2000s trends in horror as well. There are aspects of the found footage film deployed here, since the movie follows a documentary film crew, and there are interviews with locals (including a redneck who has knowledge of the film, and maybe has seen it). But mostly the film succeeds for its juxtaposition of its twin concepts.

The first is the high-minded cerebral horror, the meta commentary on filmmaking, and the second is the brutal and savage on-screen violence, the paradigm of the hillbilly horror and road trip movie that sets its terror in “*the middle of nowhere*,” and resolves with the cycle of violence, and the cycle of filmmaking, going on forever.

The best way to prove the eternal obsession of filmmakers, however, the film misses.

There needed to be a sequel, to showcase the fact that the violence and the obsession with film, lasts forever.

*The House of the Devil (DTV) * * * **

Critical Reception

“In need of some quick cash to pay for her new apartment, college student Samantha answers an ad looking for a babysitter. She notices that things are off when she arrives at the isolated Ulman house and is told that she won't be watching a child, but rather an unseen 'Mother' who is locked away in a room upstairs. Ignoring the advice of her friend Megan, who tells her that the gig is too weird, the pay is too good, and she should bail, Samantha soldiers on. But as every savvy movie fan knows, babysitters in horror movies never get a happy ending, and Samantha is no different: cultists in this house of the Devil want her to sire their dark lord reborn.

It's a thin, time-worn story for sure, but what sets *The House of the Devil* apart is the telling. Writer/director Ti West kicked off a retro craze with this movie, setting it in 1983 and giving it all the hallmarks of the era, from giant Walkmans to high-waisted jeans, from feathered hair to rotary phones. West goes deeper than these superficial trappings into filmmaking itself, however, and the end result is that this film truly feels like a lost horror flick from the early 80s. The pacing is languorous, the shots long and uninterrupted—there is none of the frenetic jump-cutting of its contemporaries to be found. Much like John Carpenter's *Halloween*, *The House of the Devil* is all about setting and reveling in a mood, then loading the last 15 minutes with all the action.

You will be waiting for something to happen as you watch Samantha explore the Ulman house, and that waiting is largely the point of it. Whether or not this film is a dread piece, or a bore is a matter of personal taste; I was nervous every time she looked around a corner or opened a door, while you may be fast asleep before the Ulmans head out the door.

While the pacing may be a point of contention, the cast simply shines. As Samantha, Jocelin Donahue charms us into believing that smart people do really dumb things they know are dumb if they're broke enough. Greta Gerwig portrays one of the genre's all-time great sidekicks (who, unfortunately for her, 'is not the babysitter'), and Tom Noonan and genre icon Mary Woronov are suitably creepy as the Ulmans.

It's possible that some of my adoration of this film is pure nostalgia because it does seem to have arrived directly from The Good Old Days when Satanists not only filled our screens, but also were rumored to live in that secluded house down the wooded lane. Who says they don't make 'em like they used to?"—Stacie Ponder, horror film scholar and blogger.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jocelin Donahue (Samantha); Tom Noonan (Mr. Ulman); Mary Woronov (Mrs. Ulman); Greta

Gerwig (Megan); A.J. Bowen (Victor Ulman); Dee Wallace (Landlady); Heather Robb (Roommate); Darryl Nau (Random Guy); Brenda Cooney (Nurse); Danielle Noe (Mother); Mary McCann (Elaine Cross); John Speredakos (Ted Stephen); Lena Dunham (911 Operator); Graham Reznick (DJ).

CREW: MPI Media Group, in association with Constructovision and RingTheJingProductions, presents a Glass Eye Pix Production, from Magnet Releasing, *The House of the Devil*. Casting: Lisa Fields. Production Designer: Jade Healy. Costume Designer: Robin Fitzgerald. Special Effects: Quantum Creation FX, John C. Loughlin. Music: Jeff Grace. Director of Photography: Eliot Rockett. Film Editor: Ti West. Producers: Larry Fessenden, Roger Kass. Executive Producers: Badie Ali, Hamza Ali, Malik B. Ali, Greg Newman. Written and Directed by: Ti West. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A financially insecure college student, Samantha (Donahue), takes a job babysitting for the mysterious and creepy Mr. Ulman (Noonan) and his wife (Woronov). At their isolated house, Samantha learns that they have lied to her, and that there is no child to babysit, only an elderly parent. She agrees, reluctantly to sit. But after the Ulmans have left the home, she begins to experience strange events and growing terror in the house. As a lunar eclipse nears, Samantha detects that her presence in the house and as a “guest” of the Ulman family is no coincidence.

COMMENTARY: While many terrific horror movies were made in the 2000s, only a select few have achieved greatness in the impressive fashion of Ti West’s *The House of the Devil*. Because West wrote, directed, and most importantly, *edited* the piece, the film evidences a real sense of unity in terms of presentation.

The cumulative effect is, in a word, powerful.

The House of the Devil is a throwback to an older genre aesthetic, one in which a sort of free-floating, generalized sense of anxiety is generated and escalated through modest, subtle means. The aura of terror arises from periods of silence, a minimum of dialogue and adept film-grammar-styled compositions. In the tradition of all great genre efforts, the movie’s stylish shape also reflects the film’s narrative.

Specifically, *The House of the Devil* is set in the early 1980s, around the time that paranoia about “Satanic Ritual Abuse” overtook the nation’s middle-class. This strange fear might have been due to the rising influence of fundamentalist Christians in the Reagan Era, and their belief that anything not born of the extreme right-wing is the work of the Devil.

Or the paranoia about Satanists in our midst could have been the result of collective parental guilt and shame over the fact that—in the yuppie era of upward mobility and two-income households—it was deemed necessary to outsource child-care to day-cares, nannies and other interlopers. After entrusting their children to strangers all day, parents—when faced with changes in their little darlings—may have found it easier to charge “Satanism” than look in the mirror.

The F.B.I. investigated the strange charges of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) and never found substantial evidence that worship of the Devil was involved even in a fraction of cases where it was raised. *The House of the Devil*, however, trenchantly utilizes this context as a springboard for its tale. It offers some brief information about SRA in its opening title card, which feels reminiscent of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) and other genre classics.

But the undercurrent or vibe established so brilliantly and thoroughly by West in *The House of the Devil* is that there is something wrong, or off with the world at large as presented in the film. The source of this problem may not be easily pinpointed but lurks just out-of-sight, slightly beyond our perception. One of the ways that West forges this free form, generalized sense-of-anxiety is to deny the audience a sense of visual comfort from the very first shot.

As the movie opens, West’s camera captures a long shot of a figure, but one seen only from the back. She is also some distance from us—through a door-frame—and we get no details. In other words, her face is withheld from us for an abnormally long spell, and the effect, visually, is to unsettle us. The camera zooms in, but still reveals no additional details. It turns out that this is Samantha (Donahue).

our college-age heroine. And she's not doing anything suspicious here, merely admiring the interior of an apartment that she hopes to rent.

But *how* the camera views Samantha begins to make the audience feel uncomfortable. For one thing, her space in the frame is limited by the surrounding “box” of the door frame. And indeed, this is a set-up that West frequently repeats; cutting off Samantha's available space in the wide-screen frame.

The free-floating anxiety the audience feels grows deeper as it observes apparently mundane details of Samantha's life. She needs money desperately if she is to rent the apartment she desires. She can't get back into her dorm-room (her roommate is having loud sex). She waits all morning on campus for a man who doesn't show up: a would-be-employer seeking a baby-sitter. Her friend, Meghan, does something unethical, and that Samantha feels reflects poorly upon her. The pepperoni pizza at the local dive doesn't taste very good today, either.

Again, not one bit of this material is earth-shattering or overtly horrific in and of itself. Instead, as the soundtrack suggests—to the lyrics of The Fixx—“*One Thing Leads to Another*.”

The movie thus makes us acutely aware of how each little step that Samantha takes brings her closer to the precipice; closer to her reckoning with terror; closer to her “*destiny*” that she is asked to accept. Specifically, Samantha takes a babysitting job at 7714 East Beaumont, way out in the woods, and then is confronted with further discomfort.

Her would-be employer, Mr. Ulman (Tom Noonan), is a liar. There's no child to “sit,” only an old woman locked away in an upstairs bedroom, and this makes Samantha and the audience uncomfortable too. This man isn't trustworthy in the slightest, but Samantha feels put-upon and he keeps throwing money at her: 400 dollars for four hours of work.

Eventually, an uncomfortable Samantha acquiesces to take the job. On the night of a total lunar eclipse, no less.

Once alone in the old, spooky, Victorian house, the camera's views of Samantha through a doorway recur repeatedly, symbolically cordoning off her free space in the frame. One long-lasting but utterly still shot even establishes the parameters of Samantha's “safe zone.” We stay in the room—the camera unmoving—as Samantha starts to probe out, deeper and deeper into the quiet, dark house. And then more discomfort comes. There are creepy touches that seem small but loom large. For instance, a faucet drips continuously, and weird sounds emerge from a sink disposal. And there are black clumps of hair in the bathtub. Then, while dancing on the staircase (wearing her Walkman), Samantha accidentally breaks a valuable vase, and then finds evidence that her employers were lying about something important.

All the little things build to big things.

Most of *The House of the Devil* is over before Satanism overtly enters the proceedings, and West truly provides one of the great set-ups in horror movie history here, assiduously ratcheting up anxiety along the way. When Samantha finally finds her way to the attic—where she observes a light on under the crack of a closed door—you'll find yourself perched on the edge of your seat. Through an unforced but deliberate pace and a canny sense of visualization, West thus brings the audience to throat-clutching terror. *The House of the Devil* is patient. It creeps up on you. It knowingly and methodically pulls down your defenses until you are absolute putty in West's hands.

West has a great eye for detail too. The film is set in the early 1980s, and the period detail is perfect, from the Sony Walkman to the Isotoner gloves to the rotary phones. Even better, the lead actresses actually seem to belong to this era. They aren't simply playing dress-up. Donahue, in particular, gives a fantastic, internally driven performance.

If *The House of the Devil* fails to please in any sense, it is simply that after the exquisite and terrifying build-up the film's resolution comes a hair too quickly. But this is indeed a minor quibble. Commendably, West opts to tell his story straight, with no self-referential humor or easy jokes to lighten the mood of unease. This movie is practically a machine built to scare you and there's never a moment where you get to breathe because the director releases you with a laugh; finding a moment outside the confines of the narrative.

Even a TV clip (on “*Frightmare Theater*”) of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* isn't used as jokey

allusion to suggests a deeper narrative purpose. Samantha's daylight existence has been—*step by step*—literally “eclipsed” by evil and darkness. From the light of the moon outside, to the TV inside horror bleeds in. Even the atavistic credits, written in 1970s Universal yellow, and accompanied by freeze frames, suggests a deep-seated, historical horror that comes straight from the subconscious for those who lived through that era.

The House of the Devil is supposedly “*Based on true unexplained events*,” but what it is really based on is solid craft: brilliant editing, photography, performances and writing.

*It's Alive (DTV) **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Bijou Phillips (Lenore Harker); James Murray (Frank Davis); Raphael Coleman (Chris Davis); Owen Teale (Sgt. Perkins). Ty Glaser (Marnie); Oliver Coopersmith (Mike); Ioan Karamfilov (Adam); Jack Ellis (Professor Baldwin); Skye Bennett (Nicole); Arkie Reece (Perry); Todd Jensen (Dr. Orbinson).

CREW: Millennium Films Presents a Signature Entertainment, Foresight Unlimited, Amicus and IPW Production in association with Aramid Entertainment film, *It's Alive*. Casting: Ilana Diamant, Sue Jones, Laura Sotirova, Marianne Stanicheva. Production Designer: Pier Luigi Basile. Costume Designer: Elvis Davis, Jasmina Vasileva Stoichkova. Music: Nicholas Pike. Special Effects: Whoodoo EFX, Ivo Jivkov, Simeon Asenov. Director of Photography: Wedigo von Schultzenndorff. Film Editor: James Herbert Patrick McMahon. Producer: Simon Fawcett, Robert Katz, Marc Toberoff. Executive Producers: Mark Damon, Boaz Davidson, Moshe Diamont, J. Todd Harris, Avi Lerner, Trevor Short. Written by: Paul Sopocy, James Portolese. Based on the screenplay by: Larry Cohen. Directed by: Josef Fusnak. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 80 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: College student Lenore Harker (Phillips) leaves college when she learns she is pregnant with the baby of her boyfriend, Frank (Murray). Six months later, when the fetus has doubled in size, she has an emergency C-section, and a murderous infant is born. Lenore loses her memory of the baby's killing spree and brings baby Daniel home to a country house. There, the child continues to kill anyone who happens by, including a former roommate and the family cat.

COMMENTARY: As much as longtime horror films may dislike modern remakes of efforts such as *Halloween* (1978), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), or *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), no one can deny that those remakes feature top-flight production values, and new, modern and intriguing spins on familiar tales. This remake of Larry Cohen's classic *It's Alive*, shot in Bulgaria, is a blatant cash grab and a slapdash picture that dishonors the original picture's legacy of intelligent horror. The remake is both cheap and dumb. The biggest problem, however, is that it is just a poorly constructed murder show, not a narrative that thoughtfully explores its concept of a monster infant.

By contrast, the Cohen original released in 1973 was a meaningful tale concerning the prevailing fears of the 1970s about everything from pollution to technology. How was the new world of the birth control pill, nuclear power, microwave ovens, Ozone depletion, acid rain and the like impacting human biology? The monster baby in that film might have been the next step in human evolution, or a biological dead-end caused by our new, toxic existence at the end of the disco decade.

Regardless of the “why” behind the monster, the baby was still a child, and so the Cohen film concerned what it means to be family, and to love family, even when a baby is not what parents expect or hope for. How far does parental love go—or should it go—when a baby is a ferocious murderer?

The original *It's Alive* movies eventually came to explore such timely topics as abortion, children with disabilities, and more. The original saga—three films in all—was always low budget but also a fascinating reflection of its creator's intellect, and therefore high-minded.

Not so this film, however, a fiercely stupid and inept effort that is, basically a series of murders committed by a baby that is seen only once or twice throughout the film's barely-feature length running time.

When on-screen, the baby is a poorly rendered CG creation that resembles, more than anything, the dancing baby on *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002). The horror scenes are heavy on spurting blood, certainly, but totally implausible. How does this baby leave its crib, or, given its size, commit the murders as they appear in the film? It seems to teleport from place to place at will.

Despite the implausibility of the murders, it is fair to state that most fans would give the film the benefit of the doubt were it to concern something meaningful, like the original film did. Here, however, there is absolutely no indication or even speculation about why Lenore has given birth to a monster. The baby's strange biological nature is not addressed in any way, or tied to any trend, event or idea in the 2000s.

Was it abundant cell phone usage that caused the mutation?

The artificial sweeteners in all our foods?

It's Alive has no idea, and no interest.

There's just a monster baby in the film, and it goes on a killing spree. The writers of the new film don't understand horror. They think blood and guts are scary (rather than just disgusting), and don't connect any material to any deep-seated human and parental fears about the process of giving birth.

The one kernel of a good idea in the film does not involve the baby's strange nature, but rather Lenore's response to her situation. Her roommate thinks that she should have had an abortion, and Lenore notes more than once what an adjustment it is becoming a mother. Lenore is zonked out and experiencing postpartum depression, so that she can't adequately cope with Daniel's strange nature. She is blind to his monstrosity, and that blindness is made apparent in the film's one and only powerful image: Lenore's bloody nipple after Daniel has bitten it raw during breast feeding.

But even a tale about post-partem depression, as intriguing as it is, doesn't cover the lack of explanation for the baby's nature, or explain how the baby is so mobile, and so powerful. It also doesn't explain Lenore's bout of amnesia, or why hospital cameras don't pick up the baby's murder spree. The screenplay is so poorly constructed that it depends on Lenore's inability to remember the birth of the baby to give Daniel more time to kill multiple visitors to the country estate. That country estate is supposed to be in Arizona, but the whole film has the whiff of a tax incentive movie, shot in some cheap foreign locale (Bulgaria, in this case).

Of all the remakes of the 2000s, one would be hard pressed to find one more disappointing, empty, or stupid than *It's Alive*. Larry Cohen, had he been involved, could have made a film for this decade that spoke to our fears in the 21st century.

Instead, this remake is stillborn.

Jennifer's Body * * *

Critical Reception

"Kusama and Cody don't always have as much fun with the horror aspects of the story as they could. Jennifer seduces and devours a boy, again and again, without much variation. This essential lack of tension probably will keep the film from making its way to the shelf alongside the cult classics Cody clearly loves."—M.E. Russell, *The Oregonian*: "Trying too hard for scary in *Jennifer's Body*," September 17, 2009.

"This is a movie about female wrath. And it's not the clean, sympathetic wrath we saw in *Thelma and Louise*; it's not the trappy blankness we wanked over in *Species*. It's ugly, wrong, powerful wrath. The kind that builds empires and destroys towns. And men are irrelevant to this wrath, in the same way Jennifer's life was irrelevant to the guys in Low Shoulder who murdered her. There's something deeply subversive about a movie that says women are angry, but not at men. Women have enough power now that men are hardly the issue. Now, we've got something to work out among ourselves."—Annalee Newitz, *IO9*: "Everybody Wants Pieces of *Jennifer's Body*," September 18, 2009.

...one of the most severely underrated movies made this century, but that doesn't mean I won't take every opportunity to shout about how great it is until it gets as regular a rotation on cable as *Halloween* or *Scream*. It is perfect, hilarious, genius, flawless, and just about every other positive adjective you can list."—Eliza Thompson, *Cosmopolitan*: "*Jennifer's Body* is a Criminally Underrated Megan Fox Movie," October 21, 2016.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Megan Fox (Jennifer); Amanda Seyfried (Needy); Johnny Simmons (Chip Dove); Adam Brody (Nikolai); Sal Cortez (Chas); Ryan Levie (Mick); Juan Riedinger (Dirk); Colin Askey (Keyboardist); Chris Pratt (Officer Roman Duda); Juno Ruddell (Officer Warzak); Kyle Gallner (Colin Gray); Joshua Emerson (Jonas Kozelle); J.K. Simmons (Mr. Wroblewski); Amy Sedaris (Toni Lesnicki); Cynthia Stevenson (Mrs. Dove); Nicole Leduc (Camille). Aman Johal (Ahmet); Don Joffe (Raymundo); Carrie Genzel (Mrs. Check); Emma Gallelo (Little Jennifer); Megan Charpentier (Little Needy); Valrie Tian (Chastity).

CREW: Fox Atomic Presents, in association with Dune Entertainment, *Jennifer's Body*. Casting: Mindy Marin. Production Designer: Arv Greywal. Costume Designer: Katia Stano. Roy Cutle, KNB EFX Group, Technicolor Creative Services Vancouver. Music: Stephen Barton, Theodore Shapiro. Director of Photography: M. David Mullen. Film Editing: Plummy Tucker. Producers: Mason Novick, Jason Reitman. Executive Producer: Diablo Cody. Written by: Diablo Cody. Directed by: Karyn Kusama. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Writing from prison, teenager Anita "Needy" (Seyfried) recounts the story of her best friend, Jennifer (Fox), and boyfriend, Chip (Simmons). Not long ago, they went to a bar called Melody Lane Tavern. There, something horrible happened to Jennifer after she left the group in a band's so-called "rape van." Jennifer returned changed from that encounter, a literal demonic man-eater. Anita attempted to learn what had happened and came to realize that Jennifer had become evil. Not just "*high school evil*," but legitimately evil.

COMMENTARY: "*Hell is a teenage girl*," Anita (Amanda Seyfried) notes in *Jennifer's Body* (2009). In the spirit of that line, this is a droll, cynical, harsh-to-the-max horror film that doesn't quite come together. It is delightfully incorrect, at least politically, but the off-the-wall humor engenders an overall sense of distance from the material, and from the main characters.

Indeed, many aspects of the film's narrative are handled with such kookiness that the viewer ends up feeling removed from the characters and their dilemmas. Some viewers may interpret this sense of distance from the nuts-and-bolts horror aspects of the film as actually making fun of the genre. Which probably explains why so many horror-conscious critics panned *Jennifer's Body*. Some viewed the piece as a slap in the face. *And they may have a point*. For horror to work well, it can't be scattershot and inconsistent; you can't just throw anything and everything at the screen and hope it all sticks.



Jennifer (Megan Fox) returns from the dead, and isn't quite right, in *Jennifer's Body* (2009).

Yet, *Jennifer's Body* also boasts something infinitely valuable in horror films: a distinctive world view, *an original voice*.

Too many horror movies produced in the 2000s rely on recycled worldviews and conventional wisdom, and *Jennifer's Body*, for all the flaws it plainly evidences, is determinedly different. Although it is garbed in the costume of a horror film, the movie's purpose is plainly satire in the mold of Juvenal, meaning it is contemptuous, abrasive, savage and in-your-face. Here, the target is America's high school culture and the changing mores of our young people. Specifically, the film involves a floundering, obscure indie band, Low Shoulder, that can't make it big and thus resorts to Satanism for dummies to achieve fifteen minutes of fame. Such Satanism requires the sacrifice of a virgin, only the band can't find one.

Surely, this is exactly how Ashlee Simpson, Paris Hilton, the Gosselins and other non-talents achieved their place in the spotlight of the 2000s, right?

Jennifer's Body also contemptuously gazes at our society's tendency to first rubberneck at human disaster and then move on with touchy-feely, popcorn platitudes and mock catharsis. We saw it after Columbine; we saw it after 9/11 too. Between endless, exploitative footage of bloodied students at a high school shooting or the Twin Towers falling down, the news networks spouted truisms about "faith," "American strength," "traditional values," etc. We were thus permitted to gawk at tragedy, and then turn around and feel good about ourselves. In *Jennifer's Body*, Cody comments on one town's "*tragedy boner*" after a tragic bar fire (brought on by the Satanists' agenda), and the media's obsession with the accident, at least until another tragedy comes along.



Jennifer (Megan Fox) attacks in *Jennifer's Body* (2009).

Then, when it's time for someone else's fifteen minutes of fame, "sorrow" proves to be "last week's emotion" in the town of Devil's Kettle. The movie even delves into the strange myths that the media creates and perpetuates during such national tragedies. Remember how CNN reported on a non-existent Trench coat Mafia at Columbine? Or told us how one brave Christian girl dared to tell the Columbine killers she believed in God before she was shot?

Pure fiction, both.

Here, the pure fiction is that the band Low Shoulder bravely rescued townspeople from the fire. Of course, this myth just makes the performers that much more famous. *They even give the tragedy a theme song.*

Jennifer's Body also gazes at America's society's disturbing trend of sexualizing younger and younger females. It looks at the way that attire, pop music, and societal expectations transform adolescent girls into powerful objects of male sexual desire. That's almost precisely what vapid Jennifer (Megan Fox) becomes after becoming inhabited by a demon.

Only this sex object bites back.

In the end, when some of Jennifer's power (not the evil part, I guess) is transplanted into nerdy Anita, the movie provides an unmistakable message of female empowerment; a taking back and controlling of the mini-skirted, skinny, bare-midriff, Bratz/Britney Spears image society relentlessly forces on our young women.

Jennifer Body's secret weapon is Megan Fox, who—*let's face it*—has been a willing vehicle for the exploitation of the young female form in pop culture cinema.

As such, she's perfect in the role of wolf in sheep's clothing. *Only Nixon could go to China, and all that.* And let's say this for any doubters: *Fox can act.* Her performance here is quite accomplished because it takes the material at face value and doesn't camp it up, which would have been disastrous. Instead, Fox cheerily spouts the most cynical, *filthy*, sexual dialogue you can imagine, and does it with the aura and attitude of total naiveté and youth. At one point, she discusses the physical after-effects of anal sex with the guilelessness of a virgin; a paradoxical contradiction. When demonically possessed of voracious appetites, Fox's Jennifer is a warning to the youth-obsessed, male-dominated culture that inappropriately sexualizes these girls: *be careful what you wish for.*

Given the message of female empowerment and the distinctive mode of communication here, brandished in Cody's zippy, pop-culture heavy dialogue, *Jennifer's Body* is clearly this generation's answer to the original *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992)—the movie, not the TV show. And interestingly, it shares in common that old movie's central flaw: it isn't scary in the slightest.

Jennifer's Body makes the terminal mistake of playing the villains and their evil plans for laughs. Similarly, Rutger Hauer and Pee Wee Herman kind of camped it up in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992) and the result was that the bottom fell out of the satire; the horror wasn't grounded in anything genuinely horrific. Though Fox doesn't play her villainous role in campy fashion, the movie's other villain: a group of "emo" "Satanists with awesome haircuts" are so silly, so over-the-top, so obvious, that—*again*—the bottom falls out of the movie. There's no sense of menace. Without it, the movie just bops from one set-piece to another, with half-thought-out ideas taking the forefront. For instance, Anita is mildly psychic, but only sometimes.

There was much backlash against Diablo Cody over this film, and the belief that Cody's dialogue is too hip; too glib.

I disagree. The dialogue is the best thing about *Jennifer's Body*, in tandem with Fox's blunt delivery. This may be a matter of subjective taste, but I would rather watch a film with a distinctive voice, than a cookie-cutter product extruded from the Hollywood assembly line.

So, how's this for a guarded recommendation: *Jennifer's Body* is "freaktarded." It's a pretty good comedy and an okay horror film too.

Last House on the Left * * * *

"Surprisingly, the update is an exceptional, truly horrific movie that follows the outline of the original while changing almost everything about its sensibility and style. Craven's film was crude, messy, volatile and vulgar, a blast of cinematic punk in opposition to the culture around it. *Last House* redux is a sleek, studio-financed production, eminently professional and suave. Where the original was pitched against the status quo, the remake squarely belongs to the mainstream."—Nathan Lee, *NPR*: "*Last House on the Left*: A Slick Horror Rehab," March 13, 2009.

"Iliadis' slick movie gives the parents and the audience a pass: There's no bitter aftertaste or hangover for us as we rejoice in the revenge wrought on the bad guys (and gal). The good guys win—and they save their young. We are led to believe that Mari's parents are justified. We're sold on the myth that the family—and, by extension, the nation—is righteous by definition and that it has an inviolable right to exact revenge."—Tirdad Derakhshani, *Philadelphia Enquirer*: "A happy-ending *Last House*," March 12, 2009.

"...fairly well-made. It's tense and unrelenting throughout; my heart was actually pounding in the final chapters..."—Tricia Olszewski, *Washington City Paper*, March 12, 2009.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Garret Dillahunt (Krug); Sara Paxton (Mari); Tony Goldwyn (John Collingwood); Monica Potter (Emma Collingwood); Spencer Treat Clark (Justin); Aaron Paul (Francis); Riki Lindhome (Sadie); Michael Bowen (Morton); Josh Cox (Giles); Martha MacIsaac (Paige).

CREW: Universal Pictures, Rogue Pictures, Crystal Lake Entertainment, Midnight Entertainment, Sean S. Cunningham Films in association with Scion films presents *The Last House on the Left*. Casting: Scout Masterson, Nancy Naylor. Production Designer: Johnny Breedt. Costume Designer: Katherine Jean Bryant. Special Effects: KNB EFX Group, Rez-Illusion. Music: Joh Murphy. Director of Photography: Sharone Meir. Film Editor: Peter McNulty. Producers: Sean Cunningham, Wes Craven, Marianne Maddalena. Executive Producer: Ray Haboush. Based on the film by: Wes Craven. Written by: Adam Alleca, Carl Ellsworth. Directed by: Dennis Iliadis. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 110 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: While the Collingwood family (Goldwyn, Potter) stay at their woodsy house, their daughter, Mari (Paxton), and her best friend, Paige (MacIsaac), unexpectedly run afoul of a group of sociopathic killers, led by Krug (Dillahunt). Krug and his cohorts, as well as his timid son, Justin (Clark), end up in the same woods as the Collingwood family home. They murder Paige, and nearly kill Mari. Then, by a twist of fate, they end up spending the night at the Collingwood house. But Ms. Collingwood realizes what they have done, and soon there's hell to pay.

COMMENTARY: Writer/director Wes Craven created *The Last House on The Left* (1972) as a Generation Gap Era re-interpretation of the 1960 Ingmar Bergman film, *Jungfrukallan* (or *The Virgin Spring*), an Academy Award winner for best foreign film.

Going back further, the film's violent tale can be traced to a twelfth-century Swedish ballad sometimes known as "*Töre's daughter in Vänge*." There are some two-dozen variations of this particular ballad, but all versions are built upon the bloody pillars of rape and revenge. The story also involves the destruction of innocence or purity, and the moral price of vengeance.

The filmed versions of "*Töre's daughter in Vänge*" all feature a relatively affluent doctor, his innocent young daughter, and the violent, unwashed "herdsmen" who—*after raping and murdering the girl*—arrive at the doctor's home to stay the night. In the end, after learning of his daughter's death or suffering, the doctor exacts bloody and righteous vengeance against the murderers.

The three celluloid versions of this long-lived story offer starkly different interpretations of the ballad.

Bergman's take is overtly religious and redemptive.

Craven's "God is Dead," Manson-era take seeks morality in a universe totally absent the Divine.

And the post-Bush or Obama era version of *Last House on the Left* offers a “let’s turn the page” approach to morality; leaving us to draw conclusions for ourselves after we have witnessed horrific, cruel, pre-meditated violence.

The remake of *Last House on the Left* (2009) makes a number of interesting and telling modifications to the Swedish ballad and original story of *Tore’s Daughter*. In this cinematic version alone, for instance, the doctor’s daughter—again named Mari (Sara Paxton)—survives the attack. Her survival removes some of “anger” that, theoretically, Dr. Collingwood should feel. His victimization, in other words, is not as severe. Also, the leader of the “herdsmen” or thugs, Krug (Garret Dillahunt), is defined more in the terms of being one of Craven’s “Bad Fathers,” than in the original film. This Krug is almost constantly seen goading his son into violent action; telling him to cowboy up and be a man. Even the rape of Mari here seems to stem more from Krug’s cruelty to his son than his own feelings of sexual desire. The point is the cycle of violence: the passing of “abuse” from one generation to another. Also, alone among the filmed versions of the tale, Dr. Collingwood in this film (Tony Goldwyn) gets to utilize his skills as a physician.

Some of these changes in the “Tore’s Daughter” template are just superficial; and some run far, far deeper. For instance, in the last act of the remake, Dr. Collingwood stabilizes his badly wounded daughter and plans to escape in a boat and get her to a hospital alongside his wife. With the aid of Mrs. Collingwood (Monica Potter) and Krug’s son, Justin (Spencer Treat Clark), Dr. Collingwood also incapacitates Krug, eliminating any and all *immediate* danger. But instead of simply escaping or killing Krug in the heat of a kill-or-be-killed moment, as was the case in the Craven version, this Dr. Collingwood takes his time and, with extensive pre-meditation, plans for the torture and death of Krug utilizing a malfunctioning microwave oven.

In other words, this is no longer a case of flight or fight.

Mari is safe. Krug is down for the count. But Col-lingwood, a man sworn to protect life, nonetheless breaks his oath and engineers a complex plan involving a delicate surgery to kill Krug.

Here’s how I see this: Were my loved ones attacked and in jeopardy, I would certainly respond violently in the moment, perhaps even murderously to protect them. But, were my wife and daughter attacked, and the situation safely ameliorated, I can’t imagine I would respond by coldly engineering—over a sustained period of time—a brutal surgery and torture scheme. Such a path goes beyond preservation of self and family.

That’s extreme sadism.

There are two ways to read this alteration in the tale for the 2000s. Either this is a pander-fest to the modern audience, ostensibly a bread-and-circuses demographic, who demand Krug’s blood and want him to suffer in a horrifying way.

Or, more likely, this is a comment on our post-9/11 age, just as Craven’s version commented on the 1970s. Yes, we were brutally attacked in September 2001 and three thousand Americans died horrible deaths, and the terrorists were evil. But the Iraq War occurred in 2003, the torture at Abu Ghraib happened in 2004, and over 101,000 Iraqis were dead in the year 2009.

Exactly when, one might rightly ask, do we get to stop avenging 9/11 with a free conscience?

Exactly when does the “*heat of the moment*” of 9/11 fade away, and reason, restraint, and law reassert themselves? We were right to strike back against those who hurt us and killed our loved ones, but how long do we continue striking back against enemies with moral impunity before we are the ones provoking a new cycle of violence?

In the 2009 version of *The Last House on the Left*, Dr. Collingwood expresses not one recrimination about his actions; and that’s also the official take of our government at the time the film was made. President Obama wanted to “*turn the page*” on American moral abuses of the Bush Years, thus leaving them unaddressed and unpunished. That’s also the state in which we leave Dr. Collingwood. Mari (like America) is safe and sound, but he, like our nation, hasn’t yet looked in the mirror and faced the consequences of his bloody actions. That needs to happen. For him and for us. And it doesn’t.

This is a fascinating change in the enduring Swedish story. In the past, Dr. Tore and Dr.

Collingwood responded to violence with savagery, but it was always in the passion of the moment. And they had motives audiences sympathized with the death of the daughter. Here, this Dr. Collingwood has time for reflection, time for pause, and his daughter yet lives. And despite time, despite the survival of his daughter, Collingwood still knowingly and mercilessly fries Krug's brain in a microwave.

He doesn't feel bad about it and in this case—I *hate to say it*—that makes the Tore character worse than the despicable Krug.

Because this Krug, like his previous incarnation, at least experiences that moment of humanity by the lake in which he realizes that he's a monster. By contrast, this Dr. Collingwood still thinks he's a doctor and an upright citizen. He marches on, but his violence is left unaddressed. And Krug, for all his brutal crimes, clearly didn't set out one morning to hurt Mari or Paige. He happened upon them, and his brutal nature asserted itself. That assertion doesn't take him off the hook for his crimes in any way, but they were crimes of opportunity.

By contrast, Collingwood is the only character in the movie who plots out and executes a torturous death for another human being. Therefore, in some ways, this newest *Last House on the Left* is the most disturbing version of the tale yet produced.

It doesn't find answers in God, like Bergman's version.

Nor does it find answers in man's nature, like Craven's anti-violence tale.

Instead, it just punts moral judgment down the line. The 2009 Dr. Collingwood feels he was justified in the pre-meditated torture and murder of another human being because he was attacked first, and I suspect many modern viewers feel the same way.

Like Rob Zombie's *Halloween* in 2007, this *Last House on the Left* is not about a monster, but about the monstrous society that breeds them. Here, the monsters might even live in the same neighborhood, right down the road, at the last house on the left.

*Long Weekend (aka Nature's Grave) (DTV) * * **

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jim Caviezel (Peter); Claudia Karvan (Carla); Star (Cricket); John Brumpton (Old Timer); Roger Ward (Truckie); Lara Robinson (Girl in Car); Gordan Waddell (Camper man); Jude Beaumont (Camper woman); Gary McMillan (Pool player); Everett De Roche (Barfly); Robert Taylor (Bartender).

CREW: Screen Media Films, Film Victoria, Screen Australia and Southern Arc Films present *Long Weekend*. Casting: Matthew Lessall. Production Designer: Robbie Perkins. Costume Designer: Michael Chisholm. Music: Jamie Blanks. Director of Photography: Karl von Moller. Film Editor: Jamie Blanks. Producers: Gary Hamilton, Nigel Odell. Executive Producers: Jamie Blanks, Ian Gibbins, Stuart Sutherland, Victor Syrmis, Ohil Taylor, Steve Wilkinson. Written by: Everett De Roche. Directed by: Jamie Blanks. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A bickering married couple, Peter (Caviezel) and Carla (Karvan), go on a long weekend camping to a remote beach. They display disrespect and hatred not only towards one another, but towards nature itself. Accordingly, nature strikes back in dynamic ways, threatening the couple's lives.

COMMENTARY: This remake of the 1978 Australian eco horror film follows very closely along the lines of the disco-decade source material, and, while not fresh or new, nonetheless plays well in the 2000s given the events of the decade.

The basic story of the original film, which has not been altered here, is that when man misbehaves and treats nature badly, nature is likely to reciprocate. What has changed, perhaps, since 1978, is that

man has only grown worse in his treatment of the environment. By the late 2000s, global warming science was a widely accepted fact among the world's scientists, and yet a few rogue governments, including the Bush Administration, still denied its existence, and turned the argument to economic consequences of fighting it. President Bush kept the U.S. out of the Kyoto Accords, for this reason. "Kyoto is, in many ways, unrealistic," he said, while explaining the U.S.'s refusal to work with other nations on the problem. *"Many countries cannot meet their Kyoto targets. The targets themselves were arbitrary and not based upon science. For America, complying with those mandates would have a negative economic impact, with layoffs of workers and price increases for consumers. And when you evaluate all these flaws, most reasonable people will understand that it's not sound public policy."*

Beyond America's refusal to join the international community on global warming benchmarks, single serving plastic bags had become the norm in United States, and were killing ocean life, and polluting the seas with plastic. The Amazon forest was being cut down, still, and America had even backed away from electric cars and higher mileage standards that would have preserved the environment.

This was no longer ignorance, or even willful ignorance, it was a deliberate turning away from science and facts.

So, *Long Weekend*, while not the most well-known of 1970s horror films, was a perfect vehicle to resurrect in the decade of flooded cities (Hurricane Katrina and global warming) and blood for oil wars. Peter and Carla are affluent, well-off people who have everything they could possibly want. Peter blows ten thousand dollars as if it is nothing, for instance, on camping equipment, and he's never even been camping. The couple can't be bothered to notice or care for the natural world around them. The natural world is merely background noise for their *"first world problems,"* including their bad marriage.

Were this to be a trial, with Mother Nature seated on the bench as a judge, and Peter and Carla the defendants, the proceedings would not go well for this extremely dislikable married couple. Consider their offenses. Peter runs over a kangaroo with his big SUV at the start of the film. He drops a cigarette in the woods and starts a brush fire that rages out of control. He goes to the beach and shoots a sea cow. He litters, by throwing a plastic trash bag in the woods. That bag makes it to the ocean, where it strangles and kills a baby sea calf. He and Carla take an eagle's egg, and so on.

They have abused nature, and done it without a thought, without a care. Nature is their playground, theirs to rape, as Ann Coulter, a Republican pundit, had the audacity to declare on television, in an attempt to discredit environmentalism. As she stated on the Fox News opinion show *Hannity & Colmes* on June 20, 2001, and then repeated in her book *"If Democrats Had Any Brains, They'd Be Republicans,"* page 104 *"God gave us dominion over the Earth. We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the trees. God says 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.'"*³⁷ *Long Weekend* is a response to that brand of thinking. It suggests that our rape of the Earth isn't even thoughtful, merely a product of our entitled, wealthy lifestyle. But the film also warns, nature, in response, will strike back. Certainly, Hurricane Katrina was a canary in the coal mine, in that regard.

There are other fascinating 2000-era aspects to this credible remake. First, although Carla is difficult, sarcastic, and described as having an affair outside her marriage with another man, it is Peter who is really terrible, at least within the action depicted on screen. He is sarcastic and mean to Carla, but then, when he gets horny, attempts to have sex with her. This is not because he has forgiven her, or cares for her; it's because, simply, he wants to have sex, and she is the only woman on the beach. He also locks Carla out of their car, so she can't leave the beach, even though she is desperate to do so.

So here we are, in 2009, still seeing "Men Behaving Badly" movies that anticipate the #MeToo movement of the late 2010s.

Another connection that may be worth making involves Peter and Carla's background, which is obliquely discussed, but not lingered upon. Carla and Peter had marital troubles, and Carla had an affair with another man, as noted above. Sometime after the affair, she became pregnant, and it is not entirely clear whether Peter or her lover was the father. Regardless, Carla had an abortion and terminated the pregnancy. Throughout the film, Carla hears a baby crying. It is, actually, the sea calf, dying, but it sounds like a human baby, a reminder to her of the aborted pregnancy.

And, an object that Carla and Peter fight over is the aforementioned eagle's egg, another symbol of birth or motherhood. So, if one attempts to tie *Long Weekend's* theme about nature's revenge to Carla's subplot about her pregnancy, the film may be noting that Peter and Carla have also attacked nature by ending her pregnancy; by terminating the unborn child's development. Their casual disregard for natural life actually extends, then, to human life too. Carla's abortion is as careless and wanton an act as running down a kangaroo or starting a brush fire or littering in the ocean and killing a baby sea calf.

All those acts are done without consideration for life, but rather heightened self-interest. These campers, who drive an expensive SUV and drop ten-grand on state-of-the-art camping equipment, no longer see themselves as part of the natural world, or as part of the cycle of life. They deem themselves separate and apart from it, and therefore not responsible for the damage they do. Again, they don't even recognize their acts as damaging. The baby doll on the beach with its cracked features is not only a symbol that reflects Carla's abortion, but their treatment of the world.

The remake of *Long Weekend* is no better and no worse than the 1978 source material, yet the 2000s remake connects better, perhaps, to the world of the 21st century and its gathering storms. The film is terrifying at points, and charts two things. First, it charts the disintegration of a terrible marriage. Second, through its revenge of nature theme, it reveals that a bad marriage is just a "first world problem" when the whole world seems to be on fire. Thus, the film is really about modern humanity's tunnel vision in the face of first world comfort and leisure. Technological advances have made man (and woman) feel as if they are Gods, unfettered from not only mortality, but from nature itself.

Long Weekend reminds us that neither of those things are true.

My Bloody Valentine 3-D ★ ★

Critical Reception

"...this pointless remake just feels old, tired and outdated."—Shaun Davis, *Sci-Fi Now*, June 18, 2009.

"The star of the show here is the implementation of 3-D technology. I must say that this was the best use of the technology I have seen yet."—Brett Weinstock, *Collider*, May 25, 2009.

"*My Bloody Valentine 3D* has such fun with itself it's hard to take seriously. But it is indeed fun, and the 3D effect gives the movie—what else—an extra bit of depth. In the end, the movie is a true blood-splashed valentine to fans of the cheesy genre that spawned it."—Kevin C. Johnson, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 24, 2020.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jensen Ackles (Tom Hanniger); Jaime King (Sarah Palmer); Kerr Smith (Axel Palmer); Betsy Rue (Irene); Edi Gathegi (Deputy Martin); Tom Atkins (Burke); Kevin Tighe (Ben Foley); Megan Boone (Megan); Karen Baum (Deputy Ferris); Joy de la Paz (Rosa); Marc Macaulay (Riggs); Todd Farmer (Frank the Trucker); Jeff Hochendoner (Red); Liam Rhodes (Michael).

CREW: Lionsgate presents *My Bloody Valentine*. Casting: Nancy Naylor. Production Designer: Ack Grobler. Costume Designer: Leeann Radeka. Special Effects: Asylum VFX. Music: Michael Wandmacher. Director of Photography: Brian Pearson. Film Editors: Cynthia Ludwig, Patrick Lussier. Producers: Jack L. Murray. Executive Producers: John Dunning, Andre Link, Michael Paseornek, John Sacchi. Based on the 1981 screenplay by: John Beird and Stephen A. Miller. Written by: Todd Farmer and Zen Smith. Directed by: Patrick Lussier. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An explosion occurs at a mine in the West Virginia town of Harmony and Tom Hanniger (Ackles), whose family owns the mine, is blamed for the disaster and leaves town. A decade later, Tom returns to Harmony to become embroiled in local politics, and a plot to sell the mine. At the same time, a killer dressed like a miner begins to murder the locals.

COMMENTARY: My Bloody Valentine 3-D never connects even on the most simple, humble basis: as a fun slasher film. All movies (yes, even slashers) must accomplish something basic if they wish to be successful in the slightest. *They must forge a sense of verisimilitude*; a surface plausibility that indicates the events of the film are actually occurring or actually could occur. There has to be enough “kitchen sink reality” in the film’s set-up and execution so that imaginations are successfully engaged for all the ensuing craziness.

Start with the real, and then, once we believe, tread into the unreal or the super-real.

Most people forget it, but the original *Friday the 13th* film in 1980 featured this quality in spades. Cunningham’s film did a more-than-credible job of setting up the environs of Camp Crystal Lake and the surrounding town. After the prologue, the film opened with shots of a babbling, idyllic brook, and a few views of the historic “Americana” architecture of the local town. The idea was that this was a real place where the seed of horror had unexpectedly grown. The characters—though undeniably stock in nature—boasted a surface plausibility. In their hairstyles. In their wardrobe. In their dispositions and demeanor. They look like they belonged in the world the filmmakers were striving to create. They were recognizable to audiences as people we might meet on the street, not collagen-lipped, eyebrow-plucked products of Hollywood.

This was even more true in the original *My Bloody Valentine* (1981), an ultra-naturalistic slasher film shot in Canada and involving blue collar miners in the town of Valentine’s Bluff. Off the top of my head, I couldn’t tell you the name of a single actor featured in that old film, but I *can* tell you that every character looked as though he or she belonged in that story. The actors were well-cast and believable in their roles. They didn’t draw attention to themselves as “actors” but seemed, rather, like regular people living in a regular mining town and being forced to reckon with extraordinary things.

The director of the original *My Bloody Valentine*, George Mihalka, was also skilled enough to realize that the film’s central location—the mine—was an important character in the drama. He focused the film’s attention, at points, on the rickety old rail car utilized to travel down a long, dark tunnel into darkness. He provided subjective, point-of-view shots of the cave walls racing by during the subterranean sojourn and descent into hell, as if we ourselves were riding down to the bottom of the mine. He established a geography for the lower levels of the dark mine, and then took that geography away from us by—in a terrifying moment—having the killer destroy the string of lightbulbs illuminating the cave. Along with the Final Girl, we had lost our bearings, and were scared.

So along comes this glitzy, superficial remake of *My Bloody Valentine*, and it simply can’t be bothered to do any of the basic creative work described above. It’s a gaudy, infantile coloring book. The actors, including Kerr Smith and Jensen Ackles, are glamorous, beautiful, perfectly coiffed, and never appear smudged, dirty or even significantly discomforted. The women all look like professional strippers. Not a single character in this film appears as though he or she has ever set foot in a mine ... *anywhere*.

Heck, they probably don’t even know that West Virginia is a state in the Union. And even though the movie spans ten years, the actors don’t age in the slightest, except for facial hair.

In this remake, the mine generates not an iota of fear. No terror. No claustrophobia. Not even a basic fear of the dark. The mine might as well be an amusement park funhouse. The only “mining” director Lussier does is for imagery. He cribs the falling miner suits, broken lightbulbs and a washing-machine scene from the original 1981 film. But in every single case, those once potent images have lost their original power because the underlying world of the characters—the *very thread that connects the movie together*—is so faulty.

The killer himself—a miner in mask and armed with pick-axe—appears in the film’s first scene with such little fanfare or build-up that at first you might assume you are watching a parody of *My Bloody Valentine*. A character stumbles into a massacre in the mine, sees the killer, and we’re off to the races without the slightest nod to creating an atmosphere or a mood. The movie gets in some gory kills, but they come at you so fast that they don’t register as anything but side-show absurdities.

Then come the 3D effects. They are cartoony and seem to exist in their own computer animated world. 3-D has been and always will be a gimmick, and the 3-D staging and execution here is novel and

creative enough. But after you get over the thrill that—wow, *things are coming towards me!*—what's left? After novelty ... *what?*

In 2D, the effects only call attention to themselves, and in terms of a horror movie, that's never a good thing. The effects should blend seamlessly with the rest of the filmmaker's world so that we can believe what we're seeing.

That's not to say I didn't enjoy some individual moments in the film. By God, there's Tom Atkins (*The Fog*, *Halloween III*, *Night of the Creeps*...) back in action!

And I would be lying if I said the film's final twist didn't surprise me in the half-second before I realized it was a cheat on the level of *High Tension*'s. But even writing about these things, I feel as though I'm discussing a roller-coaster ride, not a movie.

Didn't you like that last loop? Wasn't the third dip like, totally amazing?

Despite such pluses, I never believed in the characters, the town, the violence, or the world of *My Bloody Valentine* in the slightest. And thus, it never proves scary.

The tagline for the new *My Bloody Valentine* is “*get your heart broken.*”

Mission accomplished, movie. *Mission accomp-lished.*

It's not that the makers of the film didn't live up to the original film, it's that they toiled so hard simply to create ... a Universal Studios attraction.

Coming at ya ... nothing interesting whatsoever.

Orphan * * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“It's really to director Jaume Collet-Serra's (*House of Wax*) credit that he's gotten such a strong performance out of Fuhrman and made her so convincing. He's come up with quite a stylish film as well, with generally well-designed suspense sequences, mostly set around the Coleman's über-chic modernist home.”—Joshua Starnes, *Comingsoon.net*, July 24, 2009.

“*Orphan* is actually a pretty good little B-movie thriller—sort of V.C. Andrews pulp by way of *The Ring*/*Ringu* (except this spooky little girl isn't dead)—and most of its uncomfortable fun lies in Esther doing and saying increasingly psychotic things a little girl should (would?) simply never, ever do or say. That said, while theoretically this conflict proves intriguing, in practice (and on film rather than the page) it is a bit painful to behold, and leads one to wonder what happens to the psyche of a child actor after spewing the sort of filth Fuhrman plentifully spews here...”—Gregory Weinkauf, *The Huffington Post*: “The Week in Dodgy Cinema: Welcoming the Icky *Orphan*; Bumping the Ugly (Truth)” August 23, 2009.

“...what this film needs is a little more subtext.”—Anthony Venutolo, *Newark Star-Ledger*: *Orphan* movie review—“*Bad Seed*, again,” July 23, 2019.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Vera Farmiga (Kate); Peter Sarsgaard (John); Isabelle Fuhrman (Esther); CCH Pounder (Sister Abigail); Jimmy Bennett (Daniel); Margo Martindale (Dr. Browning); Karel Roden (Dr. Varava); Aryana Engineer (Max); Rosemary Dunsmore (Grandma Barbara); Jamie Young (Brenda); Lorry Ayers (Joyce); Brendan Wall (Detective).

CREW: Warner Bros., Dark Castle Entertainment, and Appian Way, present, in association with Studio Babelsberg Motion Pictures and Studio Canal, *Orphan*. Casting: Ronnie Yeskel. Production Designer: Tom Meyer. Costume Designer: Antoinette Messam. Special Effects: Hybride, Lola VFX, Image Engine, Prologue Films. Music: John Ottman. Director of Photography: Jeff Cutter. Film Editor: Tim Alverson. Producers: Leonardo DiCaprio, Susan Downey, Joel Silver. Executive Producers: Dan Carmody, Michael Ireland, Steve Richards. Story by: Alex Mace. Written by: David Leslie Johnson. Directed by: Jaume Collet-Serra. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 123 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Following the death of their third child during birth, the Colemans experience a rough spell in their marriage, growing ever more alienated from one another. In an attempt to pull the family together, John (Sarsgaard) and Kate (Farmiga) decide to adopt. They bring into their home a child from an orphanage, a Russian girl named Esther (Fuhrman). Although at first Esther is welcomed into the home, Kate soon begins to grow suspicious of her. When confronted by Sister Abigail (Pounder), the nun who runs the orphanage, Esther kills her with a hammer. John and Kate learn too late that Esther is not at all who or what she appears to be.

COMMENTARY: Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote “*it is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages.*”

However, in the case of the Jaume Collet-Serra’s horror movie *Orphan* (2009), that proverb might be amended to read that it is also the lack of *trust* that makes for unhappy unions.

Case in point: Kate (Farmiga) and John Coleman (Saarsgard). They’re an affluent American couple raising two children, young Danny (Bennett) and little Max (Engineer), who is virtually deaf. Despite a recent personal tragedy (a third Coleman child, Jessica, is born dead), the surface life of this couple appears normal.

Scratch that surface a little, however, and it bleeds.

Viewers can detect that these parents no longer trust another; that they are alienated from one another. Sure, the Colemans may *love* one another, but faith and belief is gone. John has confessed to a decade-old sexual infidelity, and Kate is a recovering alcoholic. In fact, her alcoholism was nearly responsible for the death of Max on an icy pond some time back.

As *Orphan* begins, Kate is on anti-depressants, in therapy, and resisting John’s attempts to re-establish physical intimacy. She is depressed, but no longer wants to “*be like this.*” As in the case in many modern marriages, John and Kate soon seek hope and purpose *outside* their problem relationship and decide to adopt a third child: a nine-year-old orphan named Esther (Fuhrman).

In short order, this manipulative, malevolent “child” successfully scratches the surface of the Coleman marriage and brings all the roiling, bleeding undercurrents to the surface. But even before the evil-to-her-rotten-core Esther enters the picture, *Orphan* informs the audience that the Colemans are distant from one another emotionally.

Commendably, the picture does so mostly in terms of production design and visuals. The Coleman family house is a study in blacks, grays and silvers. It is a cold, sterile, austere place. The iced-over pond just outside the homestead is a metaphor for Kate’s emotionally fragile condition: frozen over; *frigid*. And all around, the snow falls incessantly, burying any real hopes of an emotional thaw. In the movie’s climax, Kate must navigate a blizzard to save her family and then crash through the walls of the house; a metaphor, perhaps, for the emotional impediments that the Colemans have put up, blocking their intimacy.

Esther, of course, is the proverbial bad seed, a bullying, psychotic who hides a terrible and incredible secret. But the fact remains: the Colemans would not have proved such easy pickings for this predator if the couple had just listened to one another; if they still fostered some sense of trust.

Part of the reason that *Orphan* works as well as it does is because the writer, David Leslie Johnson, proves skilled in observing how men and women relate to one another, particularly within the confines of marriage. Once John Coleman embraces little Esther as part of his family, he is loyal to her to a fault; *to the point of dangerous denial*. It’s easier for him to blame Kate and her recent history of alcoholism than to face an unwelcome new truth.

As for Kate Coleman, she makes her case against Esther with such histrionics and emotionalism and physical rages that it is easy to disregard her arguments about Esther as being the product of a jealous, overly emotional, depressed mind. At one point, Kate tells John she’s tired of “*connecting the dots*” for him, and that remark, in particular, has the ring of truth to it. John is pretty darn clueless, and she pays for that. And Kate is so impulsive that Esther can play her like a piano.

Orphan is filled with adroitly staged, small moments involving John and Kate. Early on, John

attempts gently to initiate sex, and is put off, not in ugly or mean terms, just in routine, “*not now*,” marital ones. Later, when the couple does have sex (in the kitchen), they momentarily bonk heads during the act of passion and giggle about it like embarrassed kids. It’s awkward, but it’s also real. We get the impression of a real couple; *one in crisis*, but also in love.

These small observances about John, Kate and their relationship are important, because so much of *Orphan* revolves around Esther’s ability to totally play and thus derail the Colemans. She is a “Big,” Dramatic Evil, but the solid, understated and human performances of Saarsgard and Farmiga are what prevent *Orphan* from lapsing into overwrought, hysterical camp.

Orphan runs for over two hours and it maintains a sense of reality and paranoia for a good duration of its running time, even despite Esther’s cartoony look, which includes a Little Bo Peep outfit as well as some over-the-top violence, much of it involving a hammer. One scene on a playground employs point-of-view camerawork successfully enough that you nearly forget the whole scene is ridiculous; that the imperiled character is not alone there. Parents and children are all around, and Esther cannot bend the rules of time and space to get ahead of her prey and pop-up just in time to push her off a slide.

It’s Babes in Scareland, and it’s silly.

Over the years, there have been many films about “evil” children, and most reviews of *Orphan* dutifully noted that cinematic history. Rhoda Penmark in *The Bad Seed* (1956) was a sociopath so dangerous that Mother Nature had to take her out. Damien was The Anti-Christ in *The Omen* (1976). Macauley Culkin was *The Good Son* (1993), and that mostly forgotten film featured some of the same wintry settings and inter-family emotional alienation that dominate *Orphan*.

But here’s the thing: all the “evil” children commentary is kind of off-point and off-the-mark given the audacious twist that *Orphan* unveils with such devilish delight in the third act. Esther doesn’t really and truly fit the bill of Evil Child. Half of the description “Evil Child” is a red herring.

Thus, this movie is of a piece with another, different sub-genre.

It’s really an example of the Interloper Horror Film that was so popular in the 1990s. In this sub-genre, a secretive stranger comes into a family unit and shatters boundaries, sews mistrust, and spreads chaos. That stranger could be a nanny (*The Guardian* [1990], *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* [1992]), a tenant in the apartment downstairs (*Pacific Heights* [1990]), a new roommate (*Single White Female* [1992]), or even a new pet dog who isn’t what he seems (*Man’s Best Friend* [1993]). But the crux of all these films is that the Interloper pushes, shoves, and inveigles his/her way into an existing family/interpersonal unit, and then subverts it.

That’s Esther’s agenda in *Orphan* too. She’s a classic Interloper.

And Esther’s evil agenda could not—*would not*—work, if all was well in the Coleman house. So *Orphan* isn’t truly about Esther, it’s about a marriage and a family on the precipice, and Esther is the Interloper who kicks it off the cliff. If Saarsgard and Farmiga weren’t so authentic in their roles here, so committed to their performances, *Orphan* wouldn’t really work as well as it does.

An Evil Kid is one thing. But a marriage without trust is really scary.

Pandorum * * *

Critical Reception

“The fact is that this movie was lame, both as a movie and as a cultural symptom. It was dimly lit, filled with boring spaceship corridors and even more boring monsters, and lightly sprinkled with a backstory far more interesting than the front story...”—Annalee Newitz, 109: “*Pandorum* Delivers Zombie Mutant Banality—In Space!,” September 26, 2009.

“While the film hopes to be a thoughtful sci-fi with a psychological edge, it also wants to scare the dark matter out of you, and on both counts it’s a fail. The script is overburdened with ideas—the future of humanity, mutations, survival, paranoia, space discovery, the mental pressures of prolonged isolation,

morality, judgment—most of which come off half-baked and are unfulfilling.”—Matt Neal, *The Standard*, September 16, 2010.

“Directed by Christian Alvart, *Pandorum* delivers a solid, no frills sci-fi thriller. Its cramped, low-tech look pays off well for this claustrophobic tale of survival. Unfortunately, Alvart and his Director of Photography Wedigo von Schultzenborff can’t resist copping out to the shakycam cliché in depicting the creatures. The scenes with the creatures are so shaky and cut so fast that you can’t see anything or figure out what’s going on.”—Beth Accomando, *KPBS: “Alien Meets the Descent,”* September 25, 2009.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Dennis Quaid (Payton); Ben Foster (Bower); Cam Gigandet (Gallo); Antje Traue (Nadia); Cung Le (Manh); Eddie Rouse (Leland); Norman Reedus (Shepard); Andre Hennicke (Hunter Leader); Friederike Kempter (Evalon); Niels Bruno Schmidt (Eden); Asia Luna Mohmand (Childhunter).

CREW: Constantin Film, Impact Pictures, Studio Babelsberg, and Summit Entertainment present *Pandorum*. Casting: Ana Davila, Sarah Hally Finn, Randy Hiller. Production Designer: Richard Bridgland. Costume Designer: Ivana Milos. Special Effects: Chris Creatures Filmeffects, Legacy Effects, ARRI Digital Film, UPP, Framework Studios. Music: Michl Britsch. Director of Photography: Wedigo von Schultzenborff. Film Editing: Phillip Stahl, Yvonne Valdez. Producers: Paul W.S. Anderson, Jeremy Bolt, Robert Kulzer. Executive Producers: Travis Milloy, David Morrison, Martin Moszkowicz. Story by: Travis Milloy, Christian Alvart. Written by: Travis Milloy. Directed by: Christian Alvart. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The last survivors of the planet Earth travel aboard the sleeper ship, *Elysium*, en route to colonize the distant world called Tanis. But on the long multi-generational journey to that planet, something goes wrong. Two crewmen in hyper-sleep, Payton (Quaid) and Bower (Foster), wake up many years into the century-plus journey and experience amnesia. They find the vessel malfunctioning because of some unknown disaster. Many of the crew are dead, and the ship is populated by scavenging savages, zombie-like creatures who are the descendants of the passengers and crew. Now to preserve what remains of the human race, these men must retake the ship and get it back on course to Tanis. Unfortunately, one of them may be suffering from “*pandorum*,” a psychological disorder that people succumb to while undertaking the long challenge of space travel.

COMMENTARY: In 1941, science fiction author Robert Heinlein demonstrated some pitfalls of the colossal, generational space ark in two stories that would eventually form the novel *Orphans of the Sky* (1963). In that tale, the vast vessel *Vanguard*, bound for Proxima Centauri, became pilot-less during the journey and the passengers and flight crew aboard her were separated over time into distinct classes or sects (like the mutants or “*muties*.”) They even forgot they were aboard a ship at all.

After Heinlein, sci-fi television soon took the lead in terms of huge space ark dramas. Cordwainer Bird (a.k.a. Harlan Ellison) created the Canadian sci-fi TV program *The Starlost* (1973), which concerned three Quakers learning that they were living not on a planet surface, but rather in a dome that was part of a much larger vessel, an ark. Led by a man named Devon (Keir Dullea), these unlikely explorers discovered that the ark was actually on a collision course with a star, and that it—like the *Vanguard*—was essentially pilot-less. They spent the series visiting different domes and different cultures and trying to control their ark.

In Johnny Byrne’s “Mission of the Darrians,” an episode of *Space: 1999* from 1975, the errant Alphan protagonists came across the space ark of an alien race called the Darrians. There had been a nuclear disaster aboard the vast ark, transforming some passengers into mutants while leaving the remainder of the crew physically intact. Across the centuries, the “*pure*” Darrians resorted to cannibalism and transplant surgery from the ranks of the mutants to stay alive so they could reach a “*new Daria*.” The Darrians rationalized this exploitation of the lower caste for one reason. Carried about the ark was the DNA gene bank of the entire Darian race. Theoretically, this gene bank would ensure that, by landfall, the Darian race could re-constitute itself.

In *Doctor Who*'s "The Ark in Space" (also in 1975), another twist on the space ark format was developed. Man's future generations, the crew of a space station in this case, was being devoured while asleep in their cryo-tubes by a predatory race of alien insectoids called The Wirrn.

There are other examples of this narrative, both literary and video, including David Gerrold's *Star Trek* novel *The Galactic Whirlpool* (1980) and the 2017 sci-fi film, *Passengers*. Director Christian Alvart's harrowing horror film, *Pandorum* (2009), is a horrific permutation of the same formula.

Of course, you wouldn't know it from the advertisements, which sold the movie more as a "space zombies on the loose in a spaceship"—type of thing.

In *Pandorum*, the generational space ark *Elysium* departs from Earth in 2174, bound for the only habitable planet ever discovered: distant Tanis. Early on the Space Ark's journey, however, the crew receives a frightening message from Mission Control on Earth. "You're all that's left. Good luck and god speed."

And then, mysteriously, Earth blinks out of existence. Perhaps, as one crew member suggests, the planetary disaster was "nuclear" in origin. Or perhaps the demise of our world was caused by an asteroid collision. Regardless, the past is now prologue. The 60,000 human colonists on *Elysium* are all that remains of the human race, the seeds of our future, the seeds of our hope.

The film then jumps to an undisclosed time in the future. A likable technician, Bower (Ben Foster), awakens from extended hyper-sleep in a state of disorientation and suffering from temporary amnesia. The ship itself is a wreck: no one is at the helm, and the bridge is locked and sealed. Bower awakens another crew member on the flight team, Lt. Payton (Dennis Quaid), and together these two men learn that the ship's reactor is going critical in a matter of hours. The ark—and the human passengers—will be destroyed if the reactor can't be fixed. While Payton attempts to gain access to the bridge, Bower heads down into the ship's bowels, bound for the reactor core. His is an Orphean journey into the Underworld, to be certain, and the film makes much of this metaphor; of a journey into several layers of Hell.

Appropriately, what Bower finds throughout the gigantic ship is terrifying indeed. A species of sub-human monsters has turned the passenger section—the cryo-chamber rooms—into their hunting and feeding grounds (like the Wirrn on *Doctor Who*.) These beasts were once "sleepers" and colonists themselves, but the synthetic accelerator that was pumped into their cryo-chambers to help them adapt to life on Tanis has instead adapted them to life aboard the ruined, out-of-control *Elysium*.

These monsters—who physically resemble John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars and Joss Whedon's Reavers from *Serenity* (2005)—have set nasty booby-traps for flight crew members throughout the ark, often using live human beings as bait. There are some normal human survivors left too, but they seem to possess no knowledge that they are even on board a ship (just like in *The Starlost*). Eventually, Bower encounters a scientist named Nadia who takes him to a laboratory where all of Earth's biological heritage and legacy is stored. It's *Pandorum*'s equivalent of "Mission of the Darians'" gene bank. This biological legacy must be protected, or Earth is really and truly lost.

An unexpected twist in the familiar space ark format arises from the film's unusual title: "*Pandorum*." Pandorum is a feared disease of the mind that sometimes afflicts astronauts in deep space. The illness begins with quivering, shaking hands and then culminates with hysteria, paranoia and violence. For a comparison, recall Michael Biehn suffering from High Pressure Nervous Syndrome in Cameron's *The Abyss* (1989).

Pandorum is the space-borne equivalent.

There's an oddly beautiful, if utterly horrifying sequence regarding Pandorum early in the film's first act. Payton recounts the tale—and we see it unfold in flashback—as a crew member on another space mission goes irrevocably mad and ejects all his crew into space, in their separate sleep chambers (which, let's face it, are visually the equivalent of space-bound coffins). The film cuts to a spectacular long shot from deep space as the troubled ship ejects hundreds of these tiny flowering, technological spores. Then, at closer range, we detect a screaming human inside one of these tubes and quickly realize he is headed into oblivion, alive and conscious of his situation.

Simply stated, *Pandorum* is pandemonium.

And that quality is both the film's greatest strength and the film's most troubling weakness. The movie opens with total chaos and we—like Bower himself—have no idea what the hell is happening aboard *Elysium*. We experience the horrors of the ark alongside Bower, and it's a scarifying descent into that man-made, technological Hell. Then there's some wild action and jolts that really get the blood rolling. But before long, the story starts to feel repetitive, and there are some plot points that should have been explored with deeper insight. I don't exaggerate when I say that this movie is madness, violence, madness, more violence, and more madness, until you feel whiplash. It's exhausting.

Pandorum is also, perhaps, stuffed with one narrative u-turn too many, particularly the schizoid psyche of one character, though I understand why he's present. This schizoid crew man reflects the schizoid personality of the ship, as well as the new cultures that have sprung up aboard her. I just wish this character's back story felt more organic and less like a *de rigueur* third act "twist." By film's end, *Pandorum* is already ramped-up to insanity; it doesn't need more of it.

Outside the space ark template, *Pandorum* also borrows from *The Abyss*, as I mentioned above, and even, to some extent, *The Poseidon Adventure*, since much of the film involves traveling from one end of a damaged, dangerous vessel to the other, facing all kinds of hazards on the trip. An authentic horror film, *Pandorum* also lingers on some extreme violence and gore. In particular, there's one scene that will definitely cause nightmares: an innocent crew member awakes from cryo-sleep only to be viciously set upon and devoured by the cannibals. Grotesque stuff, but vivid and memorable.

Pandorum may not be a great movie, but it is a good one; a hectic one that captures the essential elements of the space ark tale. The lead character, Bower, is drawn well enough that he anchors most of the crazy action, at least until the over-the-top climax, which relies on a surprise you'll probably see coming a mile away.

Pandorum ends with the legend "*Tanis, Year One*." And instead of seeing *Elysium*'s journey end right there, I wanted more, which probably indicates the movie is better than I'm giving it credit for in this review. But *Pandorum* made no money at the box office and critics hated it, so we'll probably never see "*Tanis, Year Two*."

To tell you the truth, that makes me sad. This decent, technologically updated re-telling of the classic space ark adventure would make the perfect prologue to an updated "*colonizing a new planet at the edge of the galaxy*" story.

Paranormal Activity * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"This is a scarily well-made scary little film, although it certainly isn't flawless. Some of the footage supposedly shot by Micah just isn't technically possible, for example. And the Ouija board is rather a mistake, I think. But the acting is supremely naturalistic, and, for such a small-scale project, it does have an amazingly heightened effect."—Deborah Ross, *The Spectator*: "Mounting Dread," November 28, 2009.

"*Paranormal Activity* creates a highly effective mood and a pervasive sense of dread. The film's greatest assets are strong performances by what's basically a two-person cast. Sloat is effectively obnoxious as Micah, with Featherston even better as the increasingly high-strung Katie."—Lou Lumenick, *The New York Post*: "Terrifyingly inexpensive," October 9, 2009.

"The demon is a metaphor for Micah's toxic masculinity. As in all rape/revenge films, though, that's a double-edged knife. Micah wants to control Katie by filming her and her demon. Yet it's increasingly clear that he's out of his depth, as Katie informs him. 'You're *not* in control. *It* is in control, and if you think you're in control, then you're being an idiot! Not a single thing you've done has helped.' He stutters in protest as she declares, 'You are absolutely powerless.'"—Noah Berlatsky, *Splice Today*: "A Demon Boyfriend Deserves a Demon Girlfriend," September 18, 2019.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Katie (Katie Featherston) begins to experience strange phenomena in her house at night. In response, her boyfriend, Micah (Micah Sloat); Mark Fredrichs (Psychic); Amber Armstrong (Amber); Ashley Palmer (Diane).

CREW: Paramount Pictures, Solana Films and Blumhouse Productions present *Paranormal Activity*. Director of Photography: Oren Peli. Film Editor: Oren Peli. Producers: Jason Blum, Oren Peli. Executive Producer: Steven Schneider. Written and Directed by: Oren Peli. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Katie (Featherston) begins to experience strange phenomena in her house at night. In response, her boyfriend, Micah (Sloat), spends a small fortune in cameras, monitors and editing equipment to record the paranormal activity. Over a period of three weeks, the nocturnal visits grow more disturbing. And Katie reveals that this is not the first time in her life she has contended with the supernatural.

COMMENTARY: *Paranormal Activity* is the mainstream horror film response to *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), the flagship of the found footage film revolution. As viewers will recall, *The Blair Witch Project* concludes without explanation and ultimately reveals nothing. For some audiences, that's not a problem. On the contrary, that's a crucial ingredient of the movie's charm and enduring power. Like *The Birds* (1962) or *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the answer to many a riddle is left to the viewer.

For others, however, the lack of clarity about the movie's monster is a deal breaker.

A full ten years later, along came *Paranormal Activity*, a horror film that utilizes the same modus operandi: a found footage and a cinéma-vérité approach to what seems a spontaneous, "real" story. Unfortunately, however, *Paranormal Activity* goes to great lengths to satisfy the still-vocal anti-*Blair Witch Project* crowd by positioning every demonic "event," every horrifying moment in the film, literally front and center. This way, no one can complain the film doesn't deliver the "goods" that were expected.

In truth a sort of anti-*Blair Witch Project*, *Paranormal Activity* leaves precisely nothing to the imagination. This paucity of mystery, this lack of anything to speculate about ultimately renders the film intriguing, but not scary. *REC* and *Cloverfield* are superior examples of the found footage format, because they are more immersive, and don't undergo contortions to explain every detail. Those films looked like real life unfurling before your eyes, in all its messiness and half-glimpsed madness. But again, not so *Paranormal Activity* (2009), which spoon-feeds audiences a traditional, predictable narrative, and satisfies the urgent audience need for "closure" with a sad aesthetic capitulation: A CGI close-up of a demon visage.

Where *Blair Witch Project*, *REC* and *Cloverfield* are kinetic, even dizzying, *Paranormal Activity* is buttoned down and therefore visually uninventive. The film is static, photographed largely from a stationary camera planted firmly on a tripod.

On one hand, it is always nice to see a new approach to a familiar formula. The filmmakers clearly came at this found-footage film from a different angle, literally.

On the other hand, much of the demonic activity in the film occurs right in front of that unmoving camera, even symmetrically framed at points. Accordingly, the film's weakest moment finds a Ouija board planchette come to demonic life in the center of a frame.

It is certainly quite obliging of the film's demon to provide such a centered, sustained shot of its behavior.

Later in the film, the same problem recurs. The same camera-hog demon pulls Katie Featherston from her bed and the camera captures it perfectly. Moments later, her boyfriend Micah tries to help her, and the demonic entity obligingly hurls his body right into the camera. The camera cap-sizes and still captures the action perfectly.

Then, in the film's valedictory shot, the demon at long last gets its close-up.

Katie is now a demon, and the CGI effects prove it.

It would be unkind to call this approach *Blair Witch For Dummies*, but *Paranormal Activity* is certainly a *Blair Witch*-style film designed for more mainstream audiences. No one will walk out of this film with any questions, or uncertainties about what happened, or any disappointment that the monster

wasn't revealed. And ultimately, that's to *Paranormal Activity*'s deficit as a work of art and also as a horror film.

As a reviewer, this author often writes about how form and content should intertwine; how images and visual style should interact meaningfully with a narrative. This is the fatal paradox of *Paranormal Activity*: it is mounted as a "realistic," experiential film like *Blair Witch* and its *cinéma vérité* presentation, but the characters constantly make *unrealistic* choices. Furthermore, especially during the demonic attack sequences, the camera work proves absolutely untrue to life as we experience it: providing us crystal-clear proof of that which has never, ever been proven conclusively with our technology: the existence of demons.

So, *Paranormal Activity* suffers from two opposite creative impulses: it wants to be an experiential, *cinéma-vérité* film (like *REC* or *Cloverfield*) and yet it also tries to provide the clarity of vision in terms of the supernatural that we are afforded in a more traditional horror film, like *The Exorcist*, for instance, but didn't get in *BWP*.

Despite such a disconnect between visualization and narrative, *Paranormal Activity* is not a terrible film. Ironically, the best moments in the film occur *outside* the demonic attacks and horror elements. The constant push-pull-tug between Micah and Katie as they each seek to be the dominant partner in their relationship, for example, is fascinating, especially in terms of gender roles.

Micah pushes and pushes, beyond reason, to get his way and Katie—who spent her whole life being terrorized by the unseen (a demonic man?)—permits her boyfriend to terrorize her again with his perpetual disregard for her safety and her wishes. More than anything, *Paranormal Activity* is about the game of control in a romantic relationship.

It's about a woman who has lived her life has a victim and the boyfriend who knows that and uses that quality against her to push the agenda that what he wants. It's one more example of gaslighting in a decade of men behaving badly. In addition, it should be noted that the performers playing these leading roles don't hit a single false note. They are uniformly good and utterly believable. If only the screenplay had trusted them a little more, and not felt the need to rely on perfectly captured supernatural parlor tricks during the horror moments.

The real crux of *Paranormal Activity* is revealed early.

The ghost hunter asks Micah and Katie if there is any negativity in their relationship. They falsely answer no, and the ghost hunter is relieved. The demon feeds off negativity, he warns.

The remainder of the film is actually about this conversation and about this lie: about how *totally* dysfunctional the Micah/Katie relationship really is. Micah constantly bull-dozes over Katie's wishes and betrays her trust again and again.

He lies about the camera being off.

He lies about acquiring a Ouija board.

These "little" lies add up to the very negativity that allows the demon into their house. At the same time, Katie is so passive that she permits Micah to run roughshod over her. He possesses control over her life. And so, accordingly, when her body stands to be possessed, literally, by a demon, it hardly looks like an effort.

Once you lose control of your life, control of your spirit isn't far behind. That is a great, human story. Yet *Paranormal Activity* is finally so unsubtle, so without nuance in its approach to the horror elements, that the character story is all-but sacrificed. A line is crossed. In this film, our eyes should be scanning every frame, every background and foreground, for signs of Katie's demon. The filmmakers should be making us hunt out evidence of the demon. We should be working hard; engaged.

Instead, the film doesn't trust us to pay attention. The paranormal activity is so obvious, so unreal, so-in-your-face, that the movie sacrifices the *cinéma-vérité* approach it covets.

Because *Paranormal Activity* comes across as a CliffsNotes variation on *The Blair Witch Project* formula. Appreciation of it comes down to this: do you want your horror movies to engage and deal with the questions we face in real life; or do you simply want them to serve as an "escape?" Ultimately, this reviewer judges *The Blair Witch Project* far superior to *Paranormal Activity* because it engages the questions of real life. *Paranormal Activity* passes the time well-enough, and has a nice jolt or two, but

there's nothing about the demon recognizable as real.

Now Micah? *He's another story.*

That's why *Paranormal Activity* works as well as it does. The characterizations and relationships are indeed very human. It's just the staging of the horror—*of the inhuman*—that totally undercuts the film's suspension of disbelief.

*Paranormal Entity (DTV) * 1½*

Cast & Crew

CAST: Erin Marie Hogan (Samantha Finley); Shane Van Dyke (Thomas Finley); Fia Perera (Ellen Finley); Norman Saleet (Edgar Lauren).

CREW: The Asylum presents *Paranormal Entity*. Production Designer: Scott Leverett. Music: Chris Ridenhour. Director of Photography: Akis Konstantakopoulos. Film Editor: Bill Parker. Producer: Stephen Fiske. Written and Directed by: Shane Van Dyke. M.P.A.A. Rating: NR. Running time: 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On October 25, Thomas Finley calls 911, reporting that he has killed his sister. A year later, following Tom's suicide, tapes are found in the Finley house attic. The footage reveals the family in crisis, as a demonic entity invades the house, and takes a special interest in Samantha, Tom's sister. Even a doctor specializing in paranormal phenomena can't seem to stop the incursion that threatens the family, and ultimately destroys it.

COMMENTARY: As the title suggests, *Paranormal Entity* is a cheapskate knock-off of the mega-successful found footage film, *Paranormal Activity*. The set-up here is largely identical to that of the blockbuster, featuring a committed and obsessed individual setting up cameras around a suburban house to observe a demonic infestation that mostly appears at night, and manifests by activating appliances, like the television, in the middle of the night, or incrementally moving furniture.

If anything, *Paranormal Entity* proves how skilled and artful *Paranormal Activity* is in generating scares, by comparison. For all that film's abundant flaws, it features a sense of inevitability as the spiritual attacks grow more sinister and disturbing. By contrast, *Paranormal Entity* doesn't truly build towards anything beyond a pre-ordained conclusion. The final battle, in which a character is possessed, and the psychic investigator is murdered, isn't even shown.

Paranormal Entity features inconsistent editing. Sometimes the living room footage is black-and-white, sometimes it is color, and sometimes it appears as though it were filmed in quasi-night vision. Also, in a flaw familiar to even the most ardent found footage fan, nobody bothers to review the footage shot until very late in the proceedings. It makes no sense that someone sets up cameras to record supernatural phenomena, and then doesn't review the footage filmed, especially when nocturnal incursions are detected, for literally days.

It also doesn't make sense that "Mr. Psychic Dude," Dr. Lauren, is out of town on vacation for most of the movie, and unable to help the family, or even to return calls. After being contacted about a legitimate demonic threat, why would a paranormal investigator go on vacation, and not communicate with the terrorized family?

Finally, the actors here also don't succeed very ably in selling the terror of the situation. The performances are wildly variable, ranging from amateurish to occasionally effective.

Even though the film feels long at nearly ninety minutes, and doesn't always make sense, some moments still vibrate with terror. One night, for example, the invisible demon returns to the house, and leaves footprint tracks on the ceiling. These footprints are formed, we learn, from the ashes of a spilled urn, one containing the ashes of Thomas's father.

This is a genuinely creepy moment, and one that doesn't feel piped in from *Paranormal Activity*. It is a moment full of anticipatory anxiety as the endangered family members follow the footprints overhead, wondering where they will lead, and what they will find waiting for them at the end of the path.

Had the rest of the film found an equally canny and disturbing way in which to chart its familiar terror, *Paranormal Entity* wouldn't feel every inch the "mockbuster" rip-off that it ultimately emerges as.

Pontypool (DTV) * * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Stephen McHattie (Grant Mazzy); Lisa Houle (Sydney Briar); Georgina Reilly (Laurel-Ann Drummond); Hrant Alianak (Dr. Mendez); Rick Roberts (Ken Loney); Daniel Fathers (Nigel Healing); Beatriz Yuste (Nancy); Tony Burgess (Tony); Boyd Banks (Jay); Hannah Fleming (Maureen); Rachel Burns (Colleen); Laura Nordin (Spooky Woman).

CREW: IFC Films, MPI Home Video, Ponty Up Pictures and Shadow Shows presents *Pontypool*. Costume Designer: Sarah Armstrong. Production Designer: Lea Carlson. Music: Claude Foisy. Director of Photography: Mirosław Baszak. Film Editor: Jeremiah Munche. Producers: Jeffrey Cohan, Ambrose Roche. Executive Producers: Henry Cole, J. Miles Dale, Jasper Graham, Isabella Smejda. Based on the novel by: Tony Burgess. Written by: Tony Burgess. Directed by: Bruce McDonald. M.P.A.A. Rating: NR. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A former shock jock, Grant Mazzy (McHattie), now works in a rural, out-of-the-way radio station, Radio 660, "The Beacon," in Canada reporting news and weather. One morning, the station receives strange reports of a large disturbance, a riot of some sort, at the home of a local, Dr. Mendez (Alianak). Before long, the disturbances spread, and grow more disturbing. Mazzy and his station manager, Sydney (Briar), begin to get indications of a strange virus, one that turns normal people into cannibalistic attackers. Even more strangely, the virus seems to be spread by the spoken word, by the use of the English language.

COMMENTARY: *Pontypool* is a small, low-budget film, with only a handful of characters. It all takes place in a contained setting: A radio station in the basement of a rural church. Yet *Pontypool* concerns something very big: the manner in which words can infect people, can spread and take root in society, causing violence and chaos.

Can words cause a breakdown in society itself?

One need only check out Donald Trump's Twitter feed as President to answer that question in the affirmative.

On a very basic level, *Pontypool* effortlessly qualifies as another post-9/11 "fate" movie. Here, a normal day becomes very abnormal, quickly, as contradictory and confusing facts flood into those reporting the news, leaving reporters/journalists—seekers of truth—to sift through the stories for facts and accuracy. This was very much the tale reminiscent of the 9/11 attacks, as TV networks and radio stations made reports, later rescinded, of more hijacked planes in the air, and even such non-existent but picturesque horrors as "*The National Mall on fire.*"

These words transmitted fear, and augmented fear.

They extended the nightmare of the New York and Virginia terror attacks to all corners of the States, and yet the facts still took time to understand, to figure out.

Pontypool focuses on a similar scenario, with the employees of a radio station, including a DJ, attempting to puzzle out the exact nature and scope of what seems to begin as a protest or riot, but quickly becomes the zombie apocalypse. At least after a fashion.

By explicitly focusing on verbal communication via radio, *Pontypool* conforms to another trend of the aughts, particularly the idea of mass technology as a transmitter of evil, or as a portal for evil to enter the human world.

Here, the radio transmissions broadcast the virus, and spread it, but the idea is of technology

spreading evil through mass communication, which is a fascinating and eerily prescient concept, given the rise of social media at the end of the 2000s. Talk radio is the perfect venue to explore this topic in the later part of the aughts. By the 2000s, and under the leadership of drug addict and radio host Rush Limbaugh, popular talk radio was a cesspool of right-wing conspiracies and propaganda, spewing ever-escalating hatred, and rewriting reality for its dedicated listeners. Discouraging independent thought, Rush Limbaugh memorably called his most committed fans “*ditto heads*,” meaning that all they could do was nod their heads in agreement and repeat his talking points, not unlike the stammering and repetition of those infected by the virus in *Pontypool*.

Much of the film’s dialogue points to the corrosive and destructive nature of this discourse. “*Talk radio is high risk*” one character declares in *Pontypool*, stating, literally, the obvious. “*Talking is risky*” according to the dialogue because the virus is “*in the words*.” In particular, the virus creates a new arrangement of life sprung from “*perception*.”

Again, it is impossible not to read this particular virus in the film as the new mass communication paradigm of the 20th century: the creation of separate bubbles in which people of different ideologies find their biases and fears confirmed, with nary a fact to go along with that belief system. The right-wing that flocked to talk radio in the 2000s matriculated to Fox New, and then to OANN and Newsmax after Trump’s landslide defeat in 2020. These bubbles of right-wing thought pushed verifiably false narratives that whole time: that Trump’s inauguration was better attended than Obama’s; that Trump won the popular vote because of voter fraud (when he lost it by three million voters), and so forth.

What was happening in the national discourse is actually what happens in *Pontypool*: words creating a new reality, a new bubble for English speakers (Americans?) to inhabit, at the cost of the old reality and the social fabric. The film even seems to realize that this rewriting of reality is a process, from Travelgate and Monicagate in the late 1990s to Swift Boating, Trutherism and Birtherism in the 2000s and 2010s, to Q-Anon in the 2020s.

The poison or virus is “*not the end of the world, it’s just the end of the day*,” with more horrors, and ever more fantastic bubbles of conspiracy and danger created by the proliferation of irresponsible worlds of disinformation.

The film points to the 2010s, when social media picked up the consensus-reality-fracturing nature of talk radio and the 24-hour cable news cycle to drive people into ever more separate, contained universes, not of facts, but of “*alternative*” facts. *Pontypool* is fascinating, in part because it is a redemption story. Grant Mazzy has been fired from a more high-profile DJ job, acting as a “*shock jock*” to create controversy and build a dedicated following, a loyal listening audience. In the film, he is suddenly thrust in the position to defend the human race against the kind of gross sensationalism and fearmongering he has so long been a part of, all for the sake of ratings.

He notes, at film’s end “*we were never making sense*,” and forges a peace in the world (and a cessation of the virus) by turning the word “*kill*” into “*kiss*.” The eliminationist rhetoric that had been the bread and butter of the talk radio universe is turned on its head by changing “*kill*” to “*kiss*,” and the task of de-programming its ditto-heads must commence.

Pontypool pulls off some nifty tricks. It reflects 2000s era horror movie concerns, such as fate, as it regards a normal day gone terribly wrong (like 9/11), and in its exploration of technology and media creating an evil in the world. But it also charts a problem that, though present at its time of creation, had not yet reached its zenith of disruption. In 2020, it is difficult indeed not to read the film as a critique of social media, and of the balkanized alternative news world, which gives every conspiracy theorist, every nut case, every fund-raising crank an equal voice in the national discourse.

If trauma is a “*news photo without a caption*,” as *Pontypool* suggests, horror films might be described in the same fashion, warning their cultures about the dangers that exist, or could lie ahead. In this way, *Pontypool* points out the “*antidote*” to the madness of conspiracy theories and hatred that would come to define the United States in the second decade of the 21st century.

Too bad not enough people were watching and listening.

Saw VI * * *

Critical Reception

"In the end, *Saw VI* is faithful to the franchise and the twist/finale are 100% satisfying. *Saw* fans WILL walk out of the theater with their fists in the air with the feeling that they've reclaimed their beloved franchise."—Brad Miska, *Bloody Disgusting*, October 23, 2009.

"Though *Saw VI* is uninspired with its games, it surprisingly has something on its mind. *VI* is, at its core, an attack on the U.S. healthcare system. It's a good concept considering the whole reason the *Saw* franchise exists is a failure of the medical system. The film finally explores how the system has let down our killer and the whole reason that made him crazy in the first place. In a sense, it's an origin story for Jigsaw and it changes the pace for the whole franchise. Instead of focusing on the boring police investigation, *VI* focuses on this health care story, which is far more interesting."—Zachary Doiron, *Film Inquiry*: "*Saw VI*: Back to Basics Leads to Redemption," October 18, 2017.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Tobin Bell (Jigsaw); Costas Mandylor (Hoffman); Mark Rolston (Erickson); Betsy Russell (Jill); Shawnee Smith (Amanda); Peter Outerbridge (William); Athena Karkanis (Agent Perez); Samantha Lemole (Pamela Jenkins); Tanedra Howard (Simone); Marty Moreau (Eddie); Shawn Ahmed (Allen); Janelle Hutchison (Addy); Gerry Mendicino (Janitor); Caroline Cave (Debbie); George Newbern (Harold); Shauna MacDonald (Tara); Devon Bostick (Brent); Darius McCrary (Dave); Shawn Mathieson (Josh); Melanie Scofano (Gena); Karen Cliche (Shelby).

CREW: Lionsgate, Twisted Pictures, a Bigger Boat, and StudioCanal present *Saw VI*. Casting: Stephanie Gorin. Production Designer: Tony Ianni. Costume Designer: Alex Kavanaugh. Music: Charlie Clouser. Special Effects: Switch VFX. Director of Photography: David A. Armstrong. Film Editor: Andrew Coutts. Producers: Mark Burg, Gregg Hoffman, Oren Koules. Executive Producers: Peter Block, Jason Constantine, Stacey Testro, James Wan, Leigh Whannel. Written by: Patrick Melton and Marcus Dunstan. Directed by: Kevin Greutert. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After dispatching two ruthless predatory lenders, Hoffman (Mandylor) meets with Jill (Russell), the wife of Kramer (Bell), over the next game and its player. The unwitting contestant is William Easton (Outerbridge), a health care executive who denied coverage to the sick, including John.

COMMENTARY: The *Saw* franchise moves fully into the Obama era in *Saw VI*, a film that critiques fully the era of the Great Recession, and makes a moral argument for, of all things, universal health care.

You read that right.

The torture porn film franchise whose bread and butter is mangling and maiming the human body in ghastly, traumatic "tests" or games, argues in its last installment of the decade for universal health care and its moral value.

Here, the contestant, William, is a man who makes his wealth by denying health care for the sick. He does better when others do worse. He is rewarded by the system for this brazen act of evil. That is the definition of immorality, and kudos to the *Saw* franchise for recognizing that fact. The big bugaboo of the early Obama presidency, of course, was his push for universal health coverage for all Americans. He undertook this so those with pre-existing conditions couldn't be denied care. And so that those young people no longer on their parent's health care could still be healthy, until they were established in their careers. Republicans cried foul and called Obama's approach "socialism" and even feared it would lead to "Death Panels," government appointed doctors rationing care to the elderly.

There was never any evidence that such a thing might happen.

But *Saw VI* establishes its own death panels for the villains of this era. Those villains are not the Al Qaeda terrorists of earlier in the decade. They are the predatory lenders, the business executives, and the

for-profit health care system which get rich off the poor, or the sick. Throughout its running time, *Saw VI* takes aim consistently at corporate malfeasance and immorality.

Some *Saw* fans may not prefer this overtly political approach (hinted at in *Saw V*), and yet it is difficult to argue against the new approach as it grants the franchise a newfound relevance, and energy. The *Saw* format and all its conventions—the puppet, the tape, the Rube Goldberg torture contraptions, the sickly green lurid lighting—are very familiar by 2009. Too familiar, perhaps.

To continue with individual stories of devilish games, repeating the same platitudes about game players being ungrateful for life had already begun to grow tiring by the third entry. It was not a valid approach to keep the saga alive and vital. *Saw VI*'s choice to lean into a social critique of out-of-control capitalism is, at least, provocative.

Saw VI makes sitting through *Saw IV* and *Saw V* worthwhile. All the mytharc elements—involving John, Hoffman, Kramer's wife Jill, and the legacy of the Jigsaw Murders are still present and accounted for, but those soap opera moments are countered by the new timeliness of the material.

LEGACY: Although *Saw VI* is the last *Saw* entry of the aughts, the franchise returned in 2010 with *Saw 3-D*, and in 2017 with *Jigsaw*. When this book was in preparation, a new entry, *Spiral*, was being prepped for release in 2021.

Sorority Row * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"...Scream minus the wit and verve..."—Tom Meek, *Boston Phoenix*, September 17, 2009.

"...manages to be initially intriguing, thrilling and suspenseful with impressive production values, but it eventually sinks into an unintentionally funny and insipid mess while insulting the audience's intelligence."—Avi Offer, *The NYC Movie Guru*, September 11, 2009.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Briana Evigan (Cassidy); Leah Pipes (Jessica); Rumer Willis (Ellie); Jamie Chung (Claire); Margo Harshman (Charlene); Julian Morris (Andy Richards); Audrina Patridge (Megan Blaire); Caroline D'Amore (Maggie Blaire); Carrie Fisher (Mrs. Crenshaw); Matt O'Leary (Garrett Bradley); Matt Lanter (Kyle); Max Hennard (Mickey); Rick Applegate (Senator Tysoon); Ken Bolden (Dr. Rosenberg); Nicole Moore (Joanna).

CREW: Summit Entertainment and Karz Entertainment present *Sorority Row*. Casting: Joanna Colbert, Richard Mento. Production Designer: Philip Toolin. Costume Designer: Marian Toy. Music: Lucian Plane. Director of Photography: Ken Seng. Film Editor: Elliot Greenberg. Producers: Darrin Holender, Mike Karz. Executive Producers: Jay Boberg, Josie Rosen, Mark Rosman. Based on the screenplay by Mark Rosman. Written by: Josh Stolberg and Peter Goldfinger. Directed by: Stewart Hendler. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A sorority prank goes awry in a terrible way. A group of sorority sisters celebrate their senior year and hope to prank unfaithful boyfriend Garrett, who is in a relationship with Meghan. The girls set up a prank to make it look like Meghan has a convulsion and dies. The girls work with Garrett to cover up the crime, but he takes things too far and actually kills Meghan, who wasn't really dead. Now, the sorority sisters, realizing their next decision will affect the rest of their lives, throw Meghan's body down a well and cover-up her murder, and their role in it. As time passes, however, a mysterious murderer begins killing off the guilty sorority sisters.

COMMENTARY: *Sorority Row* is *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) redux, only set in the

college sorority milieu. The familiarity of this plot, which sees a group of young people conspiring to hide a crime in fear that telling the truth about it will compromise their future plans, does not, however, take away from the fact that the film is mildly entertaining. *Sorority Row* is a bit less self-reflexive than most 2000s-era memorable, nonetheless. And, it is undeniably fun to see the late, great Carrie Fisher, as a sorority house mum, brandishing a pump-action shotgun and rushing to the defense of her girls. It doesn't end well for her character, but the moment is, at the least, a cheap thrill.

All the old tropes of the slasher format are put back into play in *Sorority Row*, even though they have been seen a hundred times before. There is the deadly preamble, the prank on Garrett that goes awry. There is useless authority, here represented by Jessica's father, a senator, who plans to run for vice-president and instead of being a confidante, says simply that he doesn't like surprises.

There's more than one red herring too. Megan's sister is one, and Garrett, already a killer, is another. Other slasher paradigm elements include the killer with the secret identity, and the organizing principle of the sorority house, Theta Pi.

Loosely a remake of 1983's *House on Sorority Row*, the film does, at the least, attempt to suggest a moral price for the behavior of the randy, impulsive boys and the shallow, appearance-obsessed women. In this case, the transgression (the death of Meghan in a prank) is the catalyzing incident that makes the victims contend with their choices and decisions. Cassidy is the final girl, and the protagonist with the conscience, and the killer's identity actually relates to her future, coincidentally, and her future, directly.

Sorority Row shares in common with remakes such as *Black Christmas*, *Prom Night* and *April Fool's Day* the same major flaw involving identification. The original 1970s and 1980s material on which these films are based was told in a naturalistic, earnest style, with characters who may have been bland, but transmitted to the audience as real, and on some level, as likable. They operated in settings that, similarly, felt real or naturalistic. The audience could recognize the characters as people they might know, like or associate with. All these 2000s remakes up the production values considerably but take place in a world of rich, entitled, unlikable young adults, at least for the most part.

The ability to identify with the protagonists is lessened through this class difference/warfare lens. *I Know What You Did Last Summer* took place in a blue-collar fishing town, for example, and the characters, with their hopes and dreams of transcending that town's limitations, were inherently relatable. In *Sorority Row* and the other films tagged above, the protagonists seem more spoiled and put-upon than like good people who are terrorized by a mistake in moral judgment.

The shift, perhaps, in American wealth from the 1980s to the 2000s is to blame. By the 2000s, wages had been stagnant for decades and the middle class was shrinking. So, in these remakes, the main characters are not middle class, but super wealthy. They are the sons and daughters of rich politicians and the like. Celebrity culture, reality TV culture, and changing patterns in class seem to have resulted in protagonists who are not inherently likeable or relatable to the rest of us. A distance is created.

The dynamic in these films changes more to a "*they had it coming*" disdain than identification, and that lessens the film's horror quotient. The worst element of the *Friday the 13th* films was always the fact that some fans watched only to see dislikable characters get murdered in inventive ways, because they had it coming. The best films in the series featured likable, sympathetic characters such those placed by Adrienne King or Amy Steel. Many of the remakes of the 2000s have adopted as their centerpiece the most unattractive aspect of the slasher paradigm, tapping into audience resentment and jealousies, rather than giving the audience characters to identify with.

Sorority Row isn't bad, and pound for pound it is a stronger film than *April Fool's Day*, or *Prom Night*, but the shallow and catty nature of the characters makes it less successful than it should be. Much of the dialogue is pointed towards morality, but it feels like lip service. "*We made a string of bad choices that night*," one character admits, for instance. But the world around these characters suggests that such choices are made every day, without thought, without repercussions. This isn't a case of moral failings in a moral world. It feels more like random lapses in an immoral world, and that changes the calculus of the slasher paradigm.

Why should these kids be punished for living up to the ideals of their celebrity-driven, fame-and-wealth-seeking culture?

The Stepfather * * 1/2

Critical Reception

“There is little suspense and you will only be surprised if you fall asleep and are woken by one of the obligatory shocks, like a cat springing out of a darkened closet.”—*Evening Gazette*, December 11, 2009 page 8.

“*The Stepfather* has now joined the long list of superfluous and unnecessary Hollywood remakes, a semi-horror film that has been combined with a teen romance—that is to say, the murders compete with scenes of attractive young people in their bathing suits—that lacks the psychological acuity, originality and, frankly, the point of the original.”—Jay Stone, *Calgary Herald*, October 17, 2009, page D12.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Dylan Walsh (David Harris); Sela Ward (Susan Harding); Penn Badgley (Michael Harding); Amber Heard (Kelly Porter); Sherry Stringfield (Leah); Paige Turco (Jackie Kerns); Jon Tenney (Jay); Nancy Linehan (Mrs. Cutter); Marcuis Harris (Detective Shay); Braeden Lemasters (Sean Harding); Deirdre Lovejoy (Detective Tylar); Skyler Samuels (Beth Harding); Blue Deckert (Captain Mackie); Jason Wiles (Dylan Bennet); Kara Ortiz (Real Estate Assistant); Jessalyn Gilsig (Julie King).

CREW: Sony Pictures Entertainment, Screen Gems, Maverick Films, Imprint Media and Granada present *The Stepfather*. Casting: Lisa London, Catherine Stroud. Production Designer: Steven J. Jordan. Costume Designer: Lyn Elizabeth Paolo. Special Effects: Zoic Studios. Music: Charlie Clouser. Director of Photography: Patrick Cady. Film Editor: Eric L. Beason. Producers: Greg Mooradian, Mark Morgan. Executive Producers: J.S. Cardone, Robert Green, Julie Melda-Johnsen, Guy Oseary, Meredith Zamsky. Based on *The Stepfather* by: Donald E. Westlake. Story by: Brian Garfield and Donald E. Westlake. Written by: J.S. Cardone. Directed by: Nelson McCormick. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13 Running time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: David Harris (Walsh) is a murderer who moves from family to family, hoping to fit in. His latest victim is divorced Susan Harding (Ward), who falls for him quickly. Susan's young adult son, Michael (Badgley), begins to suspect he is too good to be true, and even connects him to an episode of *America's Most Wanted*. Before long, David is back to his murderous way, and feels disappointed in his new family, meaning that it is time for a new massacre, and an opportunity to move on.

COMMENTARY: There's nothing particularly wrong with this straight-faced remake of the 1987 horror classic, *The Stepfather*, but nothing particularly right about it, either.

The superior '80s version starring Terry O'Quinn distinguished itself with a wicked sense of humor about family life, which O'Quinn underplayed brilliantly. The original film also featured a subplot about the Stepfather's connection to TV in the sixties, the era when *Father Knows Best* and patriarchy were unquestioned, supreme. The 1987 film ended with literal and symbolic overturning of that patriarchal era through the destruction of the character's self-built birdhouse, a symbol of his authority.

By contrast, the remake provides no such sense of humor about itself, or symbolic imagery that connects the film's narrative to larger societal issues.

This version of *The Stepfather* shares a flaw with many horror remakes of the 2000s. It wipes out meaningful subtext in favor of a straight-ahead, surface-only retelling of material that was once laden with layers of meaning. In this environment, how can one not prefer the original film, when it explores so much more than the Cliff Notes remake does?

Again, the actors here do a fine job, and it's both amusing and fascinating to see Penn Badgley play the imperiled stepson of a pretender to the throne and sociopath, since he has achieved fame in the late 2010s as just such a usurper himself, on the hit series, *You*. But again, there's nothing particularly notable or unique about this film, otherwise. The kills are not inventive. They are not punctuated with edgy humor, and the premise itself even feels old. This remake might have better fit in the with the '90s

era of interloper films. The 2000s saw only a few of those like *Swimfan*, and *Orphan*, among them, and both of those possess more energy than this straight-forward remake does.

In the interloper film, someone who appears normal invades the life of others, and starts to appropriate that life, inch-by-inch. Here, David Harris begins to turn Mom's affections and support away from Michael, though David is not particularly adept at this task, and is checked by Mom for acting violently. "*Physical force, it's not okay with me,*" she tells him. David also kills her friends who attempt to warn her about his real nature and identity.

About the only moments that prove fascinating in this version of *The Stepfather* are those in which David scrambles to hide his identity and maintain a job at the same time. He refuses, for instance, to share his Social Security number to keep his real estate job, and that refusal keeps coming back to haunt him. These moments actually make David feel more like a protagonist than a mass murderer of families (again, think of *You.*). But this Stepfather exists in a more "realistic" world, and comes across as a garden-variety loony, not necessarily a great horror movie villain.

A film of solid performances and production values, *The Stepfather* just plays it all too safe. By the 2000s, the psychotic stepdad with a secret life had been seen a hundred times on the Lifetime Channel, and so this material feels dated. The execution is fine, but there's just nothing that makes the remake feel special, or that it was, in fact, necessary.

It might have been fascinating, instead, to flip the script, and remake the film as *The Stepmother*, or *The Stepson*. The daddy dynamics of this story were so perfectly and edgily expressed in the O'Quinn original that this film feels lazy and self-satisfied by comparison. It's the Remake Syndrome again. If a classic film is to be remade, there should be some galvanizing need or reason for that remake.

This one just flies quietly on autopilot and hits all the hot spots the original did, only with lesser impact.

Survival of the Dead (DTV) * * * *

Critical Reception

"This film turned out to be the end of the line for George A. Romero's zombie films, and also for George A. Romero films in general. It's better than *Diary of the Dead* by a notch, but it falls near the bottom of Romero's filmography, and you have to wonder what Romero was shooting for. It's kind of a Civil War throwback, like a Hatfields vs. McCoys with zombies. A scene involving a ferry boat was probably the most interesting sequence of the film, but there's not much else going on here. There are dead people at the end shooting each other, continuing their tribal warfare even after death. Zombies also eat a horse. Romero still had more zombie films he wanted to make but never got the chance, dying in 2017 never having made another film. He's still a giant in the genre. This was not one of his best. But let's remind ourselves, most directors aren't remembered for their last film—this film tarnished none of the luster on George's legacy."—William Latham, author, *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Alan Van Sprang (Sarge); Josh Peace (D.J.); Hardee T. Lineham (Lt. Vaughn); Dru Viergever (Soldier Zombie); Eric Woolfe (Kenny); Kenneth Welsh (O'Flynn); Julian Richlings (James); Wayne Robson (Tawdry); Kathleen Munroe (Jane); John Healy (Matthews); Phillipa Domville (Beth); Kristine Miller (Zombie Girl); John Fleming (Zombie Boy); Richard Fitzpatrick (Muldoon); Athena Karkanis (Tomboy).

CREW: Blank of the Dead Productions, Devonshire Productions, New Romero, and Sudden Storm Productions present George A. Romero's *Survival of the Dead*. Casting: John Buchan, Jason Knight. Production Designer: Arvinder Grewal. Costume Designer: Alex Kavanaugh. Special Effect s: KNB Effects Group. SPIN VFX. Music: Robert Carli. Director of Photography: Adam Swica. Film Editing: Michael Doherty. Producers: Paula Devonshire. Executive Producers: D.J. Carson, Michael Doherty, Ara Katz, George A. Romero. Art Spigel, Patrice Theroux. Written and Directed by: George A. Romero. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: As the zombie apocalypse continues, and human civilization falls, several disillusioned and desperate National Guard soldiers, led by Sarge (Van Sprang) go AWOL. They see an Internet advertisement from a strange “Captain Courageous” to visit the paradise-like Plum Island. Unfortunately, when they reach Plum Island, the now mercenary soldiers find it divided on hard lines between two feuding men: O’Flynn (Welsh) and Muldoon (Fitzpatrick). Now Sarge and his friends must decide who to fight for, or even if they should fight in another man’s war at all.

COMMENTARY: Remember this trenchant line from *Dawn of the Dead* in 1978?

“This isn’t the Republicans versus the Democrats, where we’re in a hole economically or ... or we’re in another war. This is more crucial than that. This is down to the line, folks, this is down to the line. There can be no more divisions among the living!”

What the speaker was grappling with there was the end of human civilization and an overturning of the planet Earth’s social code. This goes back, actually to “Anubis,” the short story Romero penned long ago that forms the unofficial basis for the *Living Dead* films.

In the short story’s opening scene (which ultimately became the 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*) a zombie was chased and exterminated by armed human soldiers while fleeing over a hill. Then, during the last shocking scene of the story, another solitary figure ran across that same hill. But the social order had flipped. The pursuer was now the pursued. “We see it’s an army of zombies, chasing a human with an injured, bleeding leg,” Romero noted in *The Zombies That Ate Pittsburgh*.³⁸

So, Romero’s tale was—and remains—an allegory about shifting social orders. It was about how there was this massive change, this massive revolution. Yet in some very critical ways, things remained absolutely the same.

For accuracy’s sake, one should note too that Romero was inspired by Richard Matheson’s 1954 vampire tale, *I Am Legend*, and Matheson’s idea of a new social order and a lone human attempting to defy it.

Survival of the Dead finds Romero back on strong visual and thematic ground, developing cleverly the specifics of the “Anubis” story, and—best of all—in a manner far less preachy than the first-person *Diary of the Dead*.

If I’m not mistaken, “they are us” is not uttered once and instead, Romero looks to recent American history for inspiration. Specifically, *Survival of the Dead* occurs early in the zombie plague. A group of renegade National Guard soldiers, led by Sarge (Van Sprang) leave their unit, and follow an Internet advertisement from a strange “Captain Courageous” to visit Plum Island.

Captain Courageous is actually the vengeful O’Flynn (Welsh), a man exiled from Plum Island by its draconian new “boss,” the despotic Muldoon (Fitzpatrick). O’Flynn promises Sarge and his men that they can find sanctuary, happiness and security on isolated Plum Island, and after some consideration they accept his offer.

Once on Plum Island, however, Sarge and his military unit (or rather, the survivors of his unit) realize they have actually been manipulated into fighting a long-standing feud between the two men, a feud that has at its basis, the treatment of the dead, here called “Dead Heads.”

Muldoon wants to see if the dead can be domesticated; if they can become household servants. O’Flynn just wants to shoot them in the head, even his own zombie daughter, Jane (Munroe).

Looking to real life, this story has clear antecedents on the international scene. In 2002–2003, an exile from Iraq, Ahmed Chalabi, allegedly provided U.S. Intelligence false and misleading information about weapons of mass destruction and Saddam Hussein’s supposed Al-Qaeda ties in Iraq. Obligingly, America swooped in and invaded the country, disposing of Chalabi’s enemy for him. Chalabi said “jump” (because some people thought our soldiers be greeted as liberators) and America answered, “how high?”

That’s pretty much the story here too. O’Flynn is a surrogate for Chalabi in *Survival of the Dead*. Both men are exiles who promise a rosy picture of a faraway land (Plum Island/Iraq), and Muldoon is Saddam Hussein, the tyrant now in charge of Plum Island, who sent O’Flynn away in the first place.

A bad man, yes?

But is it the military's job to take out a bad man in his own land? Especially if he isn't allied with the real enemy (Al-Qaeda/the Dead Heads)?

In the middle of this mess is the American military, represented in Romero's film by Sarge and his lieutenant, Tomboy (Karkanis). They are basically "good" and heroic individuals, attempting to make sense of the situation into which they have been manipulated. Like all good Americans, these protagonists boast a powerful sense of justice, and that sense of justice is both offended and aroused when they see that Muldoon has been murdering innocent civilians on the shore of Plum Island. He's an "evil doer," that much is plain. And for Sarge, that's enough. He needs no more information than that. Ultimately, O'Flynn and Muldoon destroy each other, and Sarge and Tomboy leave Plum Island behind, wondering if there could have been a better way for the diametrically opposed, feuding men, to resolve their differences.

In Joseph Maddrey's horror documentary *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue* (2008) Romero is inter-viewed. He discusses the fact that even after something as catastrophic as 9/11, America doesn't appear to change.

"What's it going to take to change?" Romero wonders with exasperation, on-camera.

Well, that interrogative, "*what's it going to take to change us?*"—the human race—is the idea that forms the dramatic core of the director's *Survival of the Dead*. The world is falling apart, and two old, white men are still using the fears of civilians—and brandishing the military—to achieve their personal, violent, grasping aims. Their hatred of one another is so pervasive that they literally *can't* change, and in Romero's dazzling valedictory shot, he expresses this idea visually.

Against the backdrop of a constant, eternal moon, a living dead O'Flynn and a living dead Muldoon stand a few feet apart, literally clicking empty guns at one another.

Over and over.

It's futile, it's useless.

But even in death, these men can't give up their old ways; can't surrender their sense of entitlement and personal hatred. They want power and they want death ... and they will have it.

What's it going to take to change? That's the clever, relevant idea that cannily replaces "*They are us*" in *Survival of the Dead*, and to express it so vividly, Romero ties his film—*set in a post-apocalyptic future*—to America's storied and legendary past: The Old West.

Survival of the Dead features many trappings of the Western genre. Characters wear ten-gallon hats, zombies are held in a corral, and the O'Flynn/Muldoon conflict is a determined reflection of the famous McCoy/Hatfield feud. One of the film's unforgettable images is of a lovely zombie rider, a "deadhead" woman on horseback, racing the perimeter of Plum Island, a mysterious, silent sentinel.

What's the point? We were killing each other over petty disputes in the Old West, and we're still killing each other over petty disputes today, a hundred years later, only with bigger, more lethal weapons.

Look at the political rhetoric of the early 2000s: We're going to get Osama Bin Laden "*Dead or Alive.*"

We're going to "*smoke him out of his cave.*"

"Bring 'em on!"

Clearly, Romero isn't the only one who's been channeling cowboys.

So, the Western-styled motif of *Survival of the Dead* intrinsically reminds the viewer of America's bloody past, and America's equally bloody present. The movie isn't just a Western, it's about the state of the Western world. We keep hating the "other" in our midst (the "*libruls,*" "*the rethugs,*" the Muslims, the Christians, the Blue States, the Red States, the Northerners, the Southerners) and we keep ignoring the big picture.

Divisions among the living? That's what consumes us on a daily basis.

In *Survival of the Dead*, the big picture, the *ignored* big picture, is the zombie plague, and how to appropriately deal with it. In real life, perhaps, it's poverty, the plight of the uninsured, global warming, terrorism, the gap in wealth between the 1 percent and the 99 percent, pick your poison. Our nation

can't even get to those concerns because everyone is so busy focusing on hating Americans with different ideologies. "We want our country back!"

Back from whom? Other Americans who believe slightly differently than I do, or whom worship differently than I do.

This is what *Survival of the Dead* is about. This is who O'Flynn and Muldoon are, people who can't put their petty hatred down for the common good and just want to see their side "win." But, as Romero depicts, instead of listening to each other, it's easier just to shoot someone we disagree with in the head. In one of *Survival of the Dead*'s greatest and most troubling moments, Janet (Munroe again) learns a vital secret about the deadheads and their development, their evolution. She breathlessly begins to vocalize this important information when her set-in-his-ways father shoots her in the head, an attempt to demonstrate his machismo. He would rather make a point about how tough he is than listen to what his daughter has to say. This is classic Romero plotting: a reflection of a similar moment in the original *The Crazies* (1973), wherein the cure to the deadly disease outbreak is lost to human violence and fear.

At the time of its release, there were many critical complaints about *Survival of the Dead*.

The zombies don't get enough screen time.

Why give us a western?

The CGI effects suck.

There may be some legitimacy to these complaints (yes, the CGI is bad), but the question we must ask ourselves is this: are the special effects and gory zombie attacks the only reason we enjoyed and appreciated George Romero's *Living Dead* films in the first place?

Was that all it was?

A love affair with entrails and rubber prosthetics?

Or did that love grow, because the director had something vital to tell us about the human condition and the times we live in? Was it because the director so successfully painted a picture of America in the late 1960s (regarding racism and sexism) and in the late 1970s (of consumer culture)? Is it because the living dead movies tell a larger story about that changing social order, and man's folly in the face of his imminent downfall?

If you appreciate the *Dead* films for the reasons enumerated above, then *Survival of the Dead* is a good addition to the larger canon, and one that remains true to the principles of the franchise, without again recycling the old, tired "they are us" canard.

Triangle (DTV) * * * *

Cast & Crew

CAST: Melissa George (Jess); Joshua McIvor (Tommy); Jack Taylor (Jack); Michael Dorman (Greg); Henry Nixon (Downey); Rachael Carpani (Sally); Emma Lung (Heather); Liam Hemsworth (Victor); Bryan Proberts (Driver);

CREW: First Look International, Icon Entertainment International, Framestore and UK Film Council, in association with Pacific Film and Television Commission, Pictures in Paradise, Dan Films and Triangle films presents *Triangle*. Casting: Nikki Barrett, Kelly Martin Wagner. Production Designer: Melinda Doring. Costume Designer: Steven Noble. Music: Christian Henson. Director of Photography: Robert Humphreys. Film Editor: Stuart Gazzard. Producers: Julie Baines, Chris Brown, Jason Newmark. Executive Producers: Sara Giles, Mark Gooder, Stefanie Huie, Steve Norris, Jason Rosamond. Written and Directed by: Christopher Smith. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Jess (George), the harried mother of a boy with autism, plans for a day on the yacht of a friend, Greg (Dorman), another couple, and Greg's young friend, Victor (Hemsworth). The yacht encounters a strange phenomenon at sea and is capsized. Those aboard see a mysterious, old ocean liner,

the *Aeolis*, in the distance, and board it. However, there is a mysterious presence on board, one who is intent on murdering the interlopers. Jess begins to experience a strange sense of déjà vu, as though she has been aboard the ship before.

COMMENTARY: Not unlike *Session 9*, the brilliant and immersive *Triangle* concerns a person's twisted psychology, or pathology, at the same time it suggests a dark supernatural presence or mechanism. In short, it's another variation on Kubrick's *The Shining*, which has become a kind of template for supernatural horror during the aughts.

In this case, the film's protagonist, Jess, enters a Hell of her own making. In particular, like a fly in a spider's web, she becomes caught in a repeating time loop, one which involves the death of her child, the boarding of a yacht, and then the boarding of the mysterious ocean liner at sea, where violence occurs again and again. On a psychological level, the film suggests that Jess has fashioned an eternal purgatory or hell for herself, in which she cannot escape her crime. On another level all together, the film suggests that some phenomenon at sea, perhaps the Bermuda Triangle, has fashioned this hellscape for the character.

Triangle almost immediately genuflects to *The Shining* by featuring the number 237, for example, on Jess's home, a number familiar to aficionados of the Kubrick classic, and also aboard the *Aeolis*. The room 237, of course, is the bad room, the room of visions and monstrosities at the Overlook Hotel that Danny is warned never to enter. In *Triangle*, that number is the bad place too, at least in terms of domesticity. Jess is harried, tired, neurotic and overworked, and can no longer effectively tend to her autistic son, Tommy.

There are other connections to *The Shining* in *Triangle* as well. The *Aeolis*, the liner from the 1930s, not only harkens back to a previous, long-gone era of the 20th century, as the Overlook harked back to the 1920s, it is the sight of a central haunting, like the Overlook Hotel. And both Jack Torrance and Jess are eternal denizens of that zone. They leave and come back, but escape is never permanent. The variation here is that Jess keeps happening upon the physical evidence—corpses and living people both, of previous cycles, whereas Jack simply sees ghosts, not actual physical manifestations. But in broad strokes, both films posit a haunted realm from which protagonists can never escape, despite their best efforts.

Triangle has also sometimes been compared to the Greek myth of Sisyphus. In life, Sisyphus was a clever king, but for his cunning he was punished by Zeus, king of the Gods, in the afterlife. In particular, he was cursed to spend eternity in Tartarus pushing a steep rock up a hill, only to see it roll down the hill. Then, he had to start again at the beginning, and push again, only to meet the same outcome. This cycle would repeat for eternity, with no respite.

In *Triangle*, Jess keeps trying to escape from the endless time-loop or cycle, only for events to repeat themselves, and for the bodies to pile up. Everything she tries lands her back at the loop's start. In this case, it is not the crime of hubris, however, that Jess is punished for, but rather the death of her innocent son. In this case, her psychology has created the form of the trap that snares her for all eternity. Here, it is a metaphor for guilt, and the guilty conscience that Jess cannot escape, no matter what. No matter where she goes, or what action she undertakes, she can't break free of her own conscience.

Like many other 2000s horror films, *Triangle* is set at sea. *Open Water Ghost Ship*, and *Open Water 2: Adrift* are just a few names on that list. All these films suggest the ocean as a realm of mystery, terror, but also reckoning for their American protagonists. Americans meet their fate on the sea in a lot of these films. They must reckon with their busy-all-the-time lifestyle in *Open Water*, their sense of competition and ego in *Adrift*, and their guilt in *Triangle*. Horror films of the 2000s, like *Hostel*, for instance, are often accused of being xenophobic, of locating terror in cultures outside American boundaries. These ocean-bound horror movies capture the same notion, of finding terror in a realm outside our borders, but don't use other cultures as the boogeyman. Instead, they use the sea, a place where we are not at home, and the "rules" we have set for ourselves don't matter; can't stand up against the forces of fate.

Although relatively obscure, even unknown to most horror movie fans, *Triangle* embodies the fate-centric horror efforts of its decade, even while harking back to *The Shining*, and Greek myth. It is a great film that should be championed by more fans.

Twilight: New Moon * ½

Critical Reception

“Unfortunately, along with more action and plot comes more of the obsessive, self-destructive, and even strangely abusive subtext that made *Twilight* somewhat disturbing.”—Megan Basham, *World Magazine*: “*Twilight* Time Again,” November 24, 2009.

“The film isn’t all bad—it’s simply not aimed at me. Chris Weitz (who directed the underrated *The Golden Compass*) takes over directing duties from Catherine Hardwicke, after she was hustled out of the franchise with almost indecent haste, reportedly due to ‘scheduling conflicts.’ There’s more action this time around, as Bella gets involved in an eternal human-vampire-werewolf romantic triangle, but many of the heart-to-hearts between Bella and her beaux seem to go on forever, all trembling lips and frowny foreheads and barely articulate groping for words.”—Anne Bilson, *The Arts Desk*, November 20, 2009.

“There’s something pretty retrograde about the stereotypes in *Moon*, which is set up as a choice between Jacob and Edward. Does Bella want a cultured, disciplined, cold-to-the-touch, vaguely European vampire who worries about the state of Bella’s soul? Or does she want a tattooed, bare-chested, genuine, aggressive, hot-to-the-touch, Native American werewolf?”—Louisa Thomas, *Newsweek*, November 19, 2009.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Kristen Stewart (Bella Swan); Robert Pattinson (Edward Cullen); Taylor Lautner (Jacob Black); Christina Jastrzebska (Gran); Billy Burke (Charlie Swan); Anna Kendrick (Jessica); Michael Welch (Mike); Justin Chon (Eric); Christian Serratos (Angela); Ashley Greene (Alice Cullen); Jackson Rathbone (Jasper); Michael Sheen (Aro); Jamie Campbell Bower (Caius); Christopher Heyerdahl (Marcus); Pater Facinelli (Dr. Cullen); Daniel Cudmore (Felix). Elizabeth Reaser (Esme Cullen); Kellan Lutz (Emmett Cullen); Nikki Reed (Rosalie Hale); Chaske Spencer (Sam); Gil Birmingham (Billy Black). Graham Greene (Harry Clearwater)

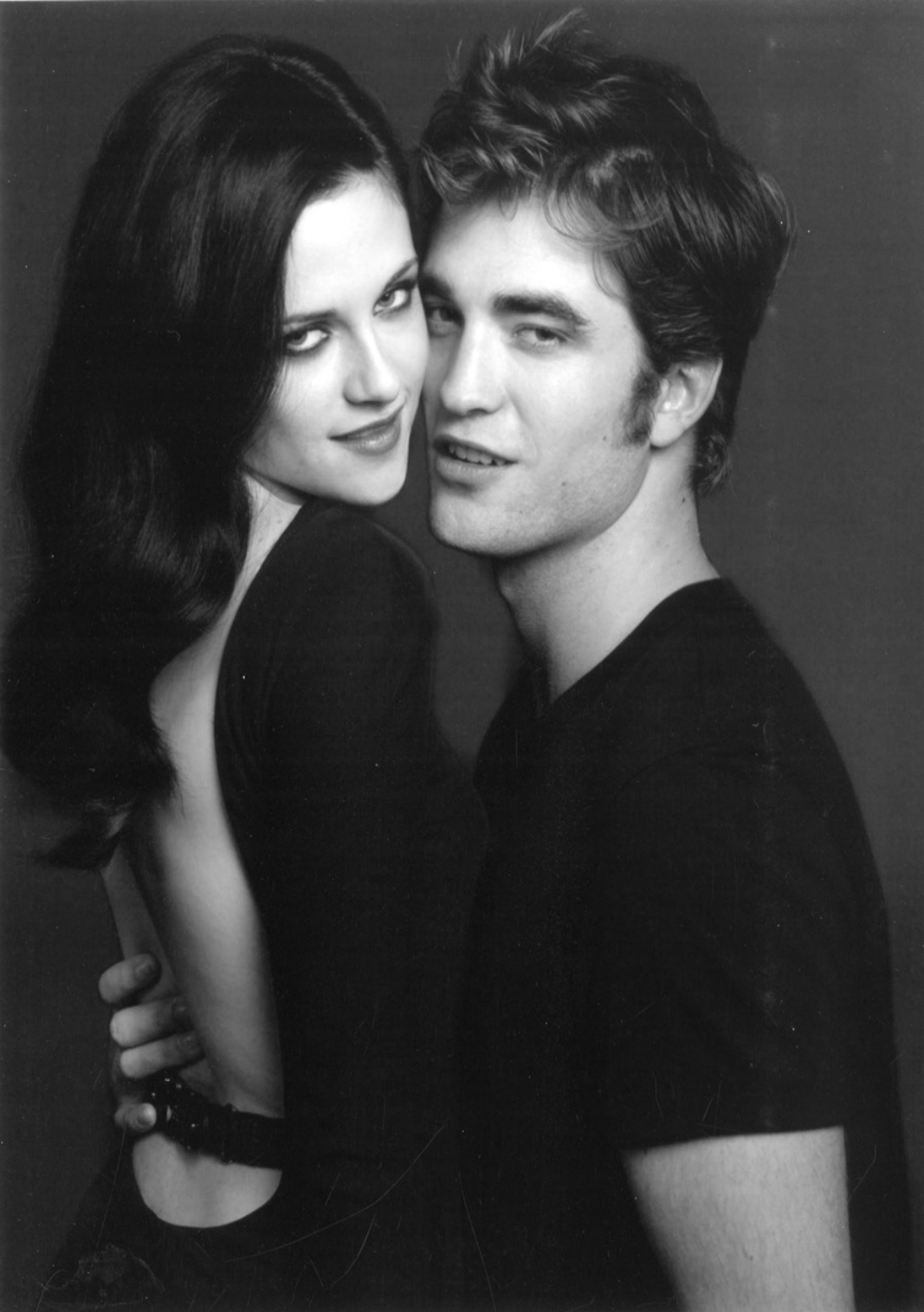
CREW: Summit Entertainment, Temple Hill Entertainment, in association with Maverick Films, Imprint Entertainment and Sunswept Entertainment present *Twilight: New Moon*. Casting: Sean Cossey, Rene Haynes, Joseph Middleton. Production Designer: David Brisbane. Costume Designer: Tish Monaghan. Music: Alexandre Desplat. Special Effects: Tippet Studio, Prime Focus, Wildfire Visual Effects. Director of Photography: Javier Aguirresarobe. Film Editor: Peter Lamber. Producers: Wyck Godfrey, Karen Rosenfelt. Executive Producers: Marty Bowen, Greg Mooradian, Mark Morgan, Guy Oseary. Based on the novel by: Stephanie Meyer. Written by: Melissa Rosenberg. Directed by: Chris Weitz. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 130 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the 18th birthday of Bella Swan (Stewart), Jasper Cullen (Rathbone) nearly attacks her when she is cut, and her blood is spilled. Her boyfriend, Edward Cullen (Pattinson), fearing for her safety with his vampire kind, leaves Forks with the entire family. This departure leaves Bella bereft, and she becomes an adrenaline junkie, trying to re-experience the high she felt when with Edward. She deepens her friendship with Jacob (Lautner), whom she learns is actually a werewolf, belonging to his own pack. When a new threat to Bella’s safety emerges in the form of Victoria (Rachel Lefevre), the vampires and the werewolves must put aside generations of distrust and conflict to save Bella.

COMMENTARY: In this, the second film in the *Twilight* Saga, some of the novel series’ ickier concepts bubble uncontrollably to the screen. In particular, the drug metaphor from the 2008 film is revived to explain Bella and Edward’s attraction for one another, and Bella is discovered to be a woman who can

only feel special when she is being courted by a male.

But more dislikable than any of this distasteful material is the deeply anti-woman message set forth throughout the film. Basically, that message states that men are monsters, but women should desire that, and be okay with it.



Twilight: New Moon's (2009) loving couple: Bella (Kristen Stewart) and Edward (Robert Pattinson).

In *Twilight*, Edward explicitly compared his attraction to Bella as heroin, a drug. Here, Bella reciprocates. When, in a burst of decency, Edward decides to break up with Bella and leave Forks, Bella is left disconsolate. She doesn't miss Edward's reprieve. Instead she misses the danger in being close to him; the danger that she could be hurt by the vampire. So, Bella takes up cliff-diving, motorcycle riding and other "extreme" activities to attempt to recapture the "high" she felt with Edward.

There is nothing wrong with exploring this idea, but *Twilight: New Moon* never really rejects it. A relationship predicated on the danger one feels when in the presence of their partner is not a healthy one. On the contrary, it paves the way for abuse, exploitation and suffering. Bella and Edward's attraction to one another is based on danger, and the movie, and their love story, never really gets past this film's acknowledgment of that fact.

Bella's attraction and growing closeness to Jacob, the constantly shirtless werewolf boy, also does the character no favors.

Why is Bella only attracted to monsters?

It is because of the danger these monsters represent.

Again, this is patently unhealthy for Bella, and her drift towards Jacob further exposes the fact that she and Edward have no real connection beyond their chemical dependency on one another. Worse, it makes Bella appear inconstant and fickle.

She's not the only fickle one. In one scene, Jacob promises her that he will never hurt her in the way that Edward did. In the very next scene—*literally the very next scene*—he hurts her in exactly the same way that Edward did.

Pardon me for lowering the discourse, but WTF?

Finally, and in an utterly grotesque way, *New Moon* suggests that the monstrous nature of Bella's relationships with Jacob and Edward is one that she should accept, expect, and actually covet. At one point during the narrative, she meets the female spouse of an alpha male werewolf. This woman, Sam's fiancé, has scars all over her face, where he has harmed her.

Yet she stays, and still loves Sam.

In the world of *Twilight*, Sam is the equivalent of a wife beater, or wife abuser, and yet his wife has no qualms about staying with him. This is the life that Bella is signing up for, and the movie approves of that choice.

It's okay, *New Moon* tells the audience, for men to abuse their spouses or partners, because the women get something in return: the high of being in a dangerous relationship with them. To paraphrase Alice to Bella in the film, this is "*life-threatening idiocy*." It is such an irresponsible message to send the male and female fans of this pop culture saga.

In terms of horror, *New Moon* is no great shakes either. The monsters here have new rules, or more accurately no rules. The werewolves can transform at will and are not bound to the cycles of the moon. And the wolves also grow to gigantic size, and, in my constant refrain in this book, are rendered with terrible CGI. The monster scenes in the film don't inspire terror, fear, or even awe and wonder. They look like cartoons.

When worrying about Bella in *New Moon*, a character tells her, "*it's just not normal, this behavior*." That's right, and *Twilight: New Moon* cloaks its anti-woman viewpoint with color and exotic flourishes of romance, danger and excitement, but what it's selling isn't just abnormal, it's unhealthy.

***Underworld: Rise of the Lycans* * * ***

Critical Reception

"Even when it flies off base—there are times when Lucian comes dangerously close to a Christ figure—the film offers a kick of zany comedy. And in what turns out to be the real feat, Tatopoulos brings his camp spectacle close to real, stirring melodrama, and that's hard to beat."—Jeffrey Bloomer, *Paste Magazine*,

Cast & Crew

CAST: Michael Sheen (Lucian); Bill Nighy (Viktor); Rhona Mitra (Sonja); Steven Mackintosh (Tannis); Kevin Greivous (Raze); David Aston (Coloman); Geraldine Brophy (Nobleman's Wife); Leighton Cardno (Lycan); Alexander Carroll (Young Lucian); Elizabeth Hawthorne (Orsova); Jason Hood (Death Dealer); Mark Mitchinson (Nobleman); Tania Nolan (Luka); Craig Parker (Sabas); Tim Raby (Janosh).

CREW: Screen Gems and Lakeshore Entertainment present, in association with Sketch Films, *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans*. Casting: Liz Mullane. Production Designer: Dan Hennah. Costume Designer: Jane Holland. Special Effects: Tatopoulos Studios, Duran Duboi Paris, Luma Pictures, Intelligent Creatures, Element FX, Furious FX, Proof, Celluloid VFX, NTropic, Fore Bleue Asia, Sub/Par Pix, Cirkus. Music: Paul Haslinger. Director of Photography: Ross Emery. Film Editors: Peter Amundson, Eric Potter. Producers: Gary Lucchesik, Tom Rosenberg, Len Wiseman. Executive Producers: Beth De Patie, James McQuaide, Eric Reid, Skip Williamson, Henry Winterstern. Based on characters by Kevin Greivous, Len Wiseman and Danny McBride. Story by: Len Wiseman, Robert Orr and Danny McBride. Written by: Danny McBride, Dirk Blackman, Howard McCain. Directed by: Patrick Tatopoulos. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In days past, Viktor (Nighy), the vampire ruler, plots the destiny of the Lycans, lycanthropes who can assume human form. He envisions them as slaves and laborers, and even raises one of the wolf-men, Lucian (Sheen). As he matures, however, Lucian falls in love with Viktor's headstrong daughter, Sonja (Mitra). When Viktor learn that Sonja is pregnant with Lucian's child, he orders his daughter and unborn grandchild executed, an act which starts the Lycan insurrection, and the war between vampires and werewolves.

COMMENTARY: The third time is the charm for the *Underworld* horror-action series. The previous entries were chopply edited and mired in exposition about the long conflict between vampires and Lycans. This film remembers the writing advice "show, don't tell" and depicts a crisp, straight-forward story of love and loss that, miraculously, deepens all the primary characters in the saga, even Selene, who shows up for a very brief cameo at film's end.

Interspecies love affairs were the flavor of the day for many mainstream horror films in the 2000s. The *Twilight* Saga depicts a human woman, Bella, torn between vampires and werewolves. *Blood and Chocolate* similarly features a werewolf-human love affair. Even *Skinwalkers* is about a "blended" family of werewolves and humans. So, *Rise of the Lycans*, in depicting the star-crossed, Romeo & Juliet love affair between Mitra's Sonja and Sheen's Lucian, doesn't exactly break new ground. However, the love story is given dramatic weight by a few factors.

First, the audience knows how this is all going to end, and that it will end badly, given the state of affairs in *Underworld* (2003). That fact grants the film a relentless inevitability. Sheen and Mitra rage against destiny, and the audience roots for them, knowing they are doomed. The film, in addition to being relentless in telling its "prequel" tale, is also affecting and doesn't play favorites. Sonja dies at the stake, burned up, carrying a child that could have brought peace to the Lycans and vampires. It's a dark, sad ending.

Taking the *Underworld* characters through this particular story deepens them and makes them seem less like action-movie clichés. Bill Nighy's Viktor, who has been a monstrous villain throughout the series, is here recast as a father who, as the leader of his people, doesn't have the freedom to save his daughter for breaking the law.

Or at least he doesn't believe he possesses that freedom. With a stiff upper lip, he condemns his daughter to death, and Viktor becomes, if not a hero, at least a sympathetic or tragic character. He loves his daughter and wants her to live. But he can't choose to spare her and also maintain control. He chooses the death of his child over losing control of the vampires, and his dilemma makes *Rise of the*

Lycans's the *Sophie's Choice* of vampire/werewolf CGI action movies.

Viktor, whom the audience has seen as a strong villainous character, is in fact quite weak. So weak that he lets the other vampire elders dictate the death of his child. How that must haunt him in the years and ages to come.

Lucian's character also grows dramatically here. The film depicts his youth and upbringing, as well as his love affair with Sonja. He becomes the hardened warrior seen in *Underworld* because of the wound Viktor has inflicted on him, the murder of his one true love, and unborn child. Sheen plays the role sensitively here, and his performance retroactively makes *Underworld* more interesting. He has a reason to fight, and the audience actually sees it. The audience isn't merely informed of political and factional rivalries between wolf-man and vampires.

And then there is young Sonja, who follows her heart, and dies for it. She is murdered, or rather sacrificed, attempting to form a bridge between Lycan and vampire. She is headstrong and beautiful, and clever. And, instead of coming off like a poor Selene substitute, Sonja emerges as a real person; someone who, in fact, as the film's triumphant final shots suggest, paves the way for the character of Selene to exist at all.

It is Selene, after all, who begins to bridge the gap between human, Lycan and vampire in *Underworld*. She is related to Sonja, and one gets a sense of the strength and power that runs through the family's veins. So, even though she is not present or spoken of (not born yet, actually) in *Rise of the Lycans*, Selene's backstory is deepened through this film. This feels real in terms of history, if one accepts that the arc of history bends towards justice. Sonja made the peace attempt, through her love of Lucian, but the world was not ready to follow her, and she was killed for her transgression. Selene, arriving later in history, has a better chance to bring the peace that Sonja imagined.

Visually, *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans* is consistent with the other films, and feels of a piece with them, but without the staccato action scenes that take away from their epic sweep. It's strange to consider it, but by focusing on the supporting characters and actors of the saga—Nighy, Sheen and Mitra—the *Underworld* series dynamically finds its most solid footing. At the end of the film, Lucian declares that “*this is just the beginning*,” and given the quality of the series' earlier entries, that might have seemed a threat.

Instead, thanks to this affecting love story, the *Underworld* series is resurrected, given a second chance.

The Uninvited ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“It may not have the imagination and inventiveness to be considered a classic, but it possesses enough gear shifts, mystery and popcorn-propelling jump moments to satisfy those in search of a Friday night fright.”—Simon Reynolds, *Digital Spy*, September 14, 2009.

“For all of its unoriginality and cliché-ridden plot points, the execution on the film is better than your typical, Asian, horror remake. The film looks fine. The Guard Brothers don't instill much ingenuity in their camera work, but given the screenplay they are dealing with, it doesn't really matter.”—*We Are Movie Geeks*, January 30, 2009.

Cast & Crew

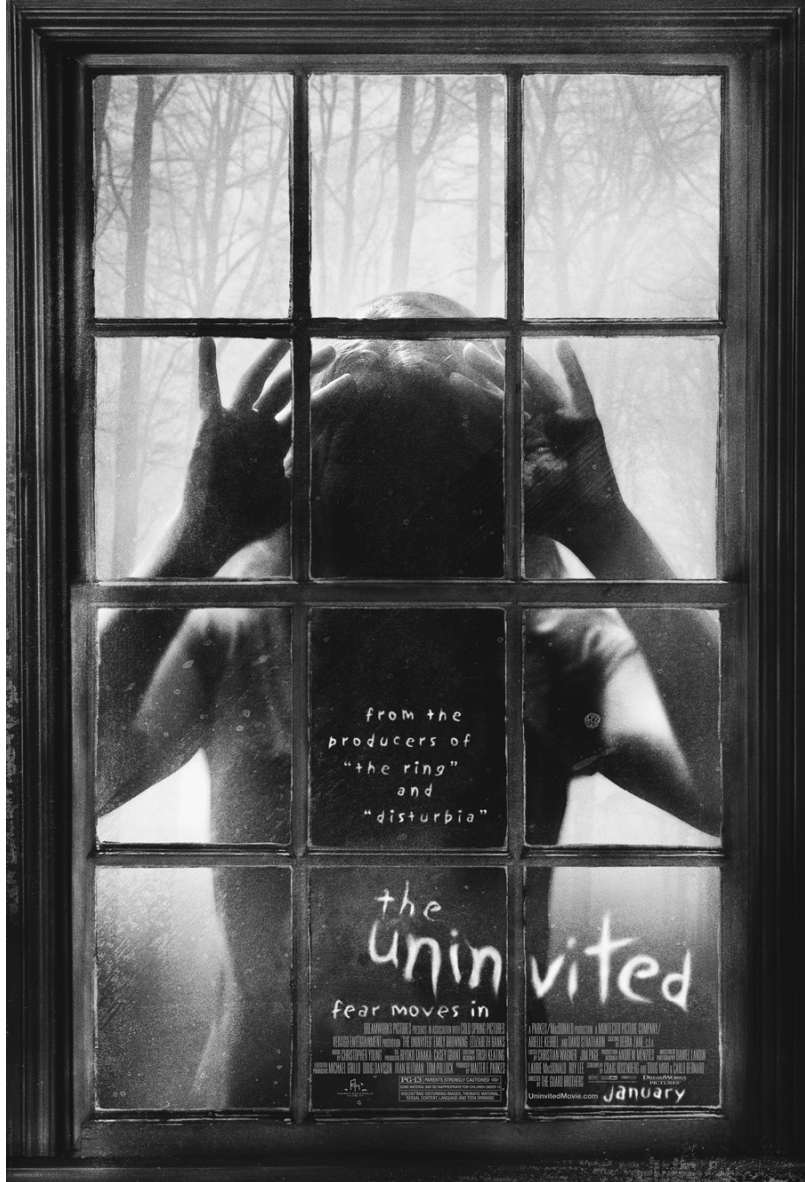
CAST: Emily Browning (Anna); Arielle Kebbel (Alex); David Strathairn (Steven); Elizabeth Banks (Rachel); Maya Massar (Mom); Kevin McNulty (Sheriff Emery); Jason Moss (Matt); Dean Paul Gibson (Dr. Silberling); Don S. Davis (Mr. Henson); Lex Burnham (Iris); Matthew Bristol (David); Danny Briston (Samuel); Heather Doerksen (Mildred); Alf Humphreys (Priest).

CREW: Dreamwork Picture presents, in association with Cold Spring Pictures, *The Uninvited*. Casting: Debra

Zane. Costume Design: Trish Keating. Production Design: Andrew Menzies. Music: Christopher Young. Director of Photography: Daniel Landin. Film Editors: Jim Page, Christian Wagner. Producers: Roy Lee, Laurie MacDonald, Walter F. Parkes. Executive Producers: Doug Davison, Michael Grillo, Gerald D. Moon, Tom Pollock, Ivan Reitman. Based on *A Tale of Two Sisters*, Written by: Jee-woon Kim. Written by: Craig Rosenberg, Doug Miro, Carlo Bernard. Directed by The Guard Brothers. M.P.A.A. Rating: PG-13. Running time: 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After ten months in a sanitarium, a devastated Anna (Browning) returns to her broken home. There, almost a year ago, her sick mother died in a fire in a boat house, and now her father, Steven (Strathairn), is planning to marry her mother's long-time nurse, Rachel (Banks). Anna is convinced, along with her sister Alex (Kebbel), that Rachel murdered their mother. Anna's one-time boyfriend, Matt (Boss), claims to know what happened the night of the fire, but he dies under mysterious circumstances. Soon, Anna comes to believe that Rachel is a notorious criminal who kills families, and then marries grieving fathers.

COMMENTARY: *A Tale of Two Sisters* was a box office hit in its own country, and so, perhaps, a remake in America was inevitable before the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Not surprisingly, the American version of the material focuses much more heavily on shocks and elaborate production design than on a deep study of characters, particularly a disturbed young woman. In fact, *The Uninvited*'s real hero is the Production Designer, and the location, a gorgeous waterfront house in Vancouver (though, it is supposed to be in Maine, in the film). The picturesque "surface" contrasts well with a world of secrets, lies, and delusions, but finally, *The Uninvited* simply outsmarts itself, lurching from one attempt to surprise the audience to another.



Poster art for *The Uninvited* (2009), a remake of *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003).

One has to wonder how an author, even a best-selling one, can afford a house like the home seen in *The Uninvited*. A treatise could be written about how Hollywood mainstream films are set at gorgeous, 5 million-dollar estates, well-beyond the financial reach of most Americans. If the idea of representation is invalid, then people wish to see themselves portrayed on the big screen. This author's guess is that the only people who are represented here are the 1 percent, the ultra-rich.

Could not this story be told against a background more recognizable or identifiable for the audience?

Leaving the gorgeous location and property aside, it is apparent that *A Tale of Two Sisters* has been re-thought for the American audience, but not necessarily in ways that tell the story better or make it more relatable. In the original film, there was no fire on the family's property, and the mother wasn't

sick, she merely hanged herself when her husband wished to leave her for the nurse, En-joo. There was no boyfriend to show up either and get murdered. The near-climactic twist of *The Uninvited* is actually revealed relatively early in *A Tale of Two Sisters*, because a “twist” is not exactly the point of that film’s narrative.



The central setting of *The Uninvited* (2009). It's a house that only a writer in a Hollywood movie could possibly afford.

However, *The Uninvited* layers on another twist beyond that one too. Specifically, it reveals that Anna was incarcerated with the real criminal, Mildred Kemp, and that she “projected” that identity on Rachel. When Anna murders Rachel, she may be murdering a not-very nice gold-digger, but Rachel is not actually the serial killer and family usurper. This doesn’t make her innocent, but nor does it justify Anna’s murder of her.

In *A Tale of Two Sisters*, Soo-mi actually creates two “ghosts” in her delusional state: her dead sister, Soo-yeon, and her nemesis, the nurse En-joo. But to complicate matters, there is also a real En-joo who is not exactly like she is in Soo-mi’s (subjective) phantasms. In fairness, the American version attempts to approximate this idea with the book-end presence of Mildred Kemp. Anna apparently recreates Rachel in that mode. However, this shift doesn’t exactly function well in the film, unless the whole point is that Anna is dangerously psychotic, and a murderer.



The sisters of *The Uninvited* (2009), Anna (Emily Browning, left) and Alex (Arielle Kebbel).

In this version of the tale, Anna kills her boyfriend, Matt, kills the nurse (who is not a murderer, unlike in the original), and is responsible (though it was an accident) for the fire that killed her mother.

In short, she is one sick puppy.

The fact that she is a multiple murderer in this version of the tale reduces identification with her, and shifts focus away from her family, and, perhaps, the true culprit. And who is the true culprit, the one responsible for this family's breakdown?

The father, Steven, of course.

He began an affair with his wife's home nurse while his wife was dying. He allowed that nurse to move his dying wife into the boathouse. And, one can't claim he was exactly active in his daughters' lives. However, Steven's moral trespasses, which are numerous, are outweighed in the film by the fact that Anna turns out to be stark, raving nuts. She is a killer, which on the moral scale makes her more extreme, and therefore worse than either Rachel or Steven. But again, Steven's actions set all this in motion, but he escapes that reckoning on the part of the audience (and the filmmakers) because Anna is revealed to be the one who is nuts.

A Tale of Two Sisters is a haunting movie about family, and about a young woman who is very, very sick. *The Uninvited* certainly moves faster, and but it is structured as a thriller, with multiple murders, and an ending which piles gimmicky twist upon gimmicky twist. What is one to make of the fact that Anna already knew Rachel was not Mildred Kemp, but then murdered Rachel believing she is Mildred Kemp? How does that make sense, even if she is sick? There is no mental illness, except perhaps schizophrenia, that causes one to act this way. And if Anna were diagnosed with schizophrenia, she never would have been released from the asylum.

The Uninvited does a good job of mining the imagery from its source material, particularly a scene involving a garbage bag, and young women in blood-stained, white dresses. The directors work overtime to "hide" the fact that Alex is dead as long as possible. On this front, they mirror *The Sixth Sense's* approach to handling Bruce Willis's character. Basically, if you watch *The Uninvited* twice, on the second viewing you realize that neither Steven nor Rachel ever directly respond to or even gaze at Alex. But in the end, the whole exercise feels futile. What's the point, *that Anna is nuts*? That her mother's and sister's death made her crazy? But in that craziness she committed more crimes? At the end of *A Tale of Two Sisters*, one feels the weight of sadness. At the end of *The Uninvited*, one feels only manipulated. I'll leave it up to the viewer to decide which emotion is the more powerful one, and more difficult one to achieve.

Wrong Turn 3: Left for Dead (DTV) * * 1/2

Cast & Crew

CAST: Tom Frederic (Nate); Janet Montgomery (Alex); Gil Koririn (Floyd); Christian Contreras (Willy); Jake Curran (Crawford); Tom McKay (Brandon); Chucky Venn (Walter); Tamer Hassan (Chavez); Jack Gordon (Trey); Louise Cliffe (Sophie); Charley Speed (Brent); Borislov Petrov (Three Toes); Borislav Iliev (Three Finger); Mike Straub (Preslow); Bill Moody (Sheriff Carver); Emma Clifford (Deputy Lane); Mac McDonald (Warden Ladew); Todd Jensen (Marshal).

CREW: 20th Century-Fox Presents a Summit Entertainment, Constantin Film, *Wrong Turn 3: Left for Dead*. Casting: Gillian Hawser. Production Design: Bobi Michailovski. Costume Designer: Maria Mladenova. Music: Claude Foisy. Special Effects: Yovko Dogandjilski, Technology. Director of Photography: Lorenzo Senatore. Film Editing: Raul Davalos. Producer: Jeffrey beach, Phillip Roth. Executive Producers: Erik Feig, Robert Kulzer. Written by: Connor James Delaney. Directed by: Declan O'Brien. M.P.A.A. Rating: Not Rated. Running time: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Grafton Prison transfers several prisoners, including Chavez (Hassan), Crawford (Curran) and Floyd (Koririn), in West Virginia, near a location where a group of college kids were murdered by

deformed hillbillies, including Three Fingers (Iliev) while camping and white-water rafting. The hillbillies run the prison transfer bus off the road in the wilderness, and the survivors encounter someone from earlier massacre, Alex (Montgomery). The prisoners, Alex, and a prison guard named Nate (Frederic) attempt to survive in the woods even as the savages hunt them down.

COMMENTARY: *Wrong Turn 3*, which was not even shot on the same continent as West Virginia, the location of the franchise, is the least successful or effective film in the franchise, at least during the 2000s. That distinction, however, does not mean that the film entirely lacks merit. Even though all the characters look and sound foreign, and there is some pandering in terms of showing gratuitous T&A in the opening scenes, the film manages to be intriguing on the basis of two key elements.

The first such element involves the popular trend in the 2000s to pit evil against evil, or bad against bad. “*No matter who wins, we lose*,” is a crucial concept of the era, depicted in such efforts as *Freddy vs. Jason* and *AVP*.

As written elsewhere in this book, that idea was mirrored in political contests such as Bush vs. Kerry, where people didn't like or feel good about either option. But in *Wrong Turn 3*, a bus full of prison convicts go up against the savage hillbillies made famous by the franchise. The criminals are pretty despicable. Chavez is a gang leader, and Floyd is both a white supremacist/Nazi and a serial killer. There is very little redeeming about these characters, and thus the survival of the protagonists, including Nate and Alex, depends on their allying with someone they would not associate with in more normal circumstances. In *Freddy vs. Jason*, Jason emerged as being a preferable ally to Krueger for the imperiled teens, and in *AVP*, the Predator, Scar, could be trusted more than the acid-dripping xenomorphs. Clear-cut lines of good and evil were forsaken in all these instances, in favor of shades of gray. “*The enemy of my enemy is my friend*,” remember?

To a lesser, but not indistinguishable extent, *Wrong Turn 3* erects the same paradigm. When confronted with horny, cannibalistic, torturing hillbillies, allying with Nazis and thugs may be unsavory, but it isn't unthinkable. In fact, it's necessary, at least for a time. *Wrong Turn 3* manages to build and sustain tension through its “evil vs. evil” paradigm, as loyalties and intentions among the prisoners cannot be taken for granted or assumed.

In connection with that idea, *Wrong Turn 3*'s cast of characters includes a prison guard named Nate, who less obviously walks a gray line between hero and if not villain, at least criminal. There is a discussion of the global recession of 2008 in the film, including a mention of the World Bank, and the protagonists at one point encounter an armored car filled with cash. For Nate, who is low paid as a prison guard, and who boasts aspirations of going to law school and retiring to Miami, the acquisition of that cash becomes a paramount consideration. Someone whom we should trust as a figure of law enforcement and authority, ends up not being so trustworthy after all. He returns, at the end of the film, to steal the contents of the truck, but meets an unhappy demise. By featuring this subplot and character, *Wrong Turn 3* seems to suggest that “evil against evil” may simply be a byproduct of the system we all live under in this country. The idea isn't so much, right vs. wrong, but what can I do to get ahead in an unfair system?

Wrong Turn 3 involves two factions or co-cultures defined by their response to the dominant economic/social system. One is the hillbilly family, which has separated from society, and created its own society, with its own rules, and even habitat. The other faction, what we would call “normal,” have chosen assimilation. Their approach to economics and upward mobility is to game the system. To go along as if obeying the rules, but then, when an opportunity (like the cash in the armored truck) presents itself, to break the rules to get ahead. The dynamics of these two factions force one to confront the question of evil. The hillbillies are murderers and monsters, but they live by their own rules, and stick to their territory. Nate and the others, exempting Alex, are not so upfront about their ambitions and appetites. They seem to be allies, until they see an opportunity for financial enrichment.

Wrong Turn 3 is not a great horror movie, but it does not discredit the series, either. At the very least, the film reveals an attempt to remain relevant in a pop culture shaken by terrorism, recession and

other shocks. Intriguingly, those shocks would have little to no impact on the separated society of the film's hillbilly cannibals.

Zombieland ★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Director Ruben Fleischer expertly finds ways around the cookie cutter story by employing novel integration of voiceover, flashback and Columbus' rules into the proceedings. Though the film does move towards an implausible climax, there are just too many laughs and gross-out effects to really care. Come on, are you going to see a film called *Zombieland* and take it seriously?"—David Harris, *Spectrum Culture*, September 29, 2009.

"If zombie horror flicks are actually about one's fear of the general population, this one is about a young man overcoming his fears so he can find his place in the world. That helps make *Zombieland* one of the best movies of the year, as well as one of the funniest."—Kristian Lin, *Fort Worth Weekly*: "Night of the Laughing Dead," September 30, 2009.

"Two words: BILL MURRAY. One of the bravest and riotous cameos in film history. Gonzo filmmaking at its best, *Zombieland* is breezily and slyly directed by Ruben Fleischer, particularly the opening sequence showcasing the end of civilization in slow motion to the tune of Metallica's 'For Whom the Bell Tolls.' The four leads (Woody Harrelson, Jesse Eisenberg, Emma Stone and Abigail Breslin) are our witty tour guides of the deadlands.

The opening credits sequence is a masterpiece with slow-motion, three-dimensional graphical tableaux that are as perverse as they are comical.

Writers Rhett Reese and Paul Wernick have a command of the hip language, evoking Chuck Palahniuk. Between the many horror homages is a human story of needing connection, particularly in an emotionally empty world. The poignant scenes mesh surprisingly well with the black humor."—Jonas Schwartz, film critic and author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Cast & Crew

CAST: Jesse Eisenberg (Columbus); Woody Harrelson (Tallahassee); Emma Stone (Wichita); Abigail Breslin (Little Rock); Amber Heard (406); Bill Murray (Himself); Derek Graf (Clown Zombie).

CREW: Casting: John Papsidera. Production Designer: Maher Ahmad. Costume Designer Magali Guidasci. Special Effects: Alterian, Inc., Zoic Studios, CIS Vancouver. Music: David Sardy. Director of Photography: Michael Bonvillain. Film Editor: Alan Baumgarten. Executive Producers: Ryan Kavanaugh, Gavin Polone, Rhett Reese, Ezra Swerdlow, Paul Wernick. Written by: Rhett Reese, Paul Wernick. Directed by: Ruben Fleischer. M.P.A.A. Rating: R. Running time: 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The zombie apocalypse has begun, and American society has crumbled. To cope with the New World Disorder, a nervous, anti-social survivor, Columbus (Eisenberg) creates a set of survival rules that he lives and thrives by. But soon, Columbus must question those rules as he joins up with other, colorful survivors, including Tallahassee (Harrelson), Wichita (Stone) and Little Rock (Breslin).

COMMENTARY: Ruben Fleischer's *Zombieland* opens to the patriotic strains of Francis Scott Key's *The Star-Spangled Banner*. America's stirring national anthem is paired with the image of a small American flag dangling to the side, askew. A voice-over narration informs the audience that Old Glory's colors have faded.

"This isn't really America anymore," the audience learns. "*It's the United States of Zombieland.*"

Then, in the background, the U.S. Capitol dome is eclipsed. In the foreground, a ravenous,

drooling zombie supersedes its prominence in the frame.

Meet the New World Order. The Zombies are in charge.

Arriving at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, *Zombieland*'s inaugural conjunction of image, sound and voice strikes a pitch-perfect note. The turbulent epoch spanning 2000–2009 was brimming with zombie apocalypses in horror films (*Dawn of the Dead*, *Land of the Dead*, *28 Days Later*, *Diary of the Dead*, etc.), so this movie has much to satirize in terms of running zombies and other recent genre tropes.

Much more importantly, the bitter decade was the era of Bush v. Gore, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Anthrax attacks, the Economic collapse (x 2!) and Recession, Swine Flu, Hurricane Katrina, the racist attacks against Barack Obama (as a closet Muslim, un-American, born in Kenya) and more. It was a toxic time of color-coded terror alerts, surgical masks in flu season, terrorist fist bumps, death panels, and Fox News. America had *endured it all*. At one point, our narrator in *Zombieland* also informs the audience that the zombie plague begins in a very specific fashion.

By “*making you hateful*.”

From its incipient imagery, *Zombieland* reveals modern America to be a land populated by seething, monstrous marauders who have overturned the order of things as we know it. And the worst thing we can do, as responsible citizens of *Zombieland*, is to live by the edicts of selfishness, of simple personal survival, just looking out for ourselves as society spirals out-of-control. The world seems to push for the destruction of the safety net, less infrastructure, and increased class divisions. That notion is captured in the survivalist ethic this world seems to demand. But the real answer is the opposite, the film tells us. In a real crisis, going it alone is a recipe for disaster and death. By working together and helping one another, by connecting, we can restore the balance.

Zombieland's intrepid narrator and protagonist is named Columbus (after Columbus, Ohio), and the (Eisenberg) relates in detail the routine of his life before the zombie apocalypse. An anti-social shut-in suffering from irritable bowel syndrome and chronic anxiety (not to mention OCD), Columbus spent his pre-holocaust days in a bubble of technological isolation playing World of Warcraft, drinking Mountain Dew and ordering-in delivery pizza.

In other words, Columbus was checked out completely. He was unable to cope with our society as it was. At the start of the zombie apocalypse, Columbus coped with the change by attempting to impose a sense of order on the chaos swirling around him. He developed a set of rules to handle every situation: #1: Cardio. #3: Beware of Bathrooms. #4: Seat belts. #7: Travel light. And so on. These rules represent his personal Bible of sorts. During the course of the film, Columbus joins up with a gun-slinging cowboy, Tallahassee (Harrelson), a con-artist, Wichita (Stone), and a twelve-year-old girl, Little Rock (Breslin). As this group forms an *ad hoc* family, Columbus realizes that his rules can't always save the day. Some rules were meant to be broken. And, in a family ... well, you have to forgive and even accept the trespasses.

Thinking symbolically, every character in *Zombieland* is named after a city in America. The city of Tallahassee is in Florida, the very state that controversially handed Bush the White House in 2000. Wichita is in Kansas, so think of Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas*, or the old Wizard of Oz quote “*We're not in Kansas anymore*.” Columbus is in Ohio, the state that, again controversially, handed Bush the White House again in 2004. And Little Rock is in Arkansas; the home of Bill Clinton; the President who presided over the first era of 24-hour cable news cycles, Fox News, MSNBC, and the new national hyper-partisanship. Each one of these cities has a “problem”; just as in *Zombieland*, each character has a problem.

George Romero stated often that his zombie films concerned the overturning and restructuring of society. *Zombieland* also follows that template, albeit in humorous fashion. In search of their “new” life, Columbus and his friends take a road trip and smash the symbols of the zombified U.S. When they stop at a roadside tourist trap, a place of kitschy, overpriced souvenirs (“*We Wantum Your Wampum*,”) the film cuts to a slow-motion dance of destruction, a montage cut to Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. Consider that selection of music and the decision to destroy, in essence, a place of commerce and craven capitalism. *The Marriage of Figaro* was an opera from 1778 about a “*day of madness*,” and was highly

critical of aristocracy and nobility. It was critical of the established order, in much the same way as *Zombieland* is critical of contemporary social order.

And then, in another important scene, Columbus accidentally kills the last living celebrity in America—a final, blazing punctuation to the age of glittering star-worshipping and gossip-mongering that has consumed and distracted our culture while big crises loom.

Perez Hilton, take note: it's *Twilight* for *Twilight*.

Finally, *Zombieland* suggests that the key to rebuilding humanity comes in the willful shattering of Columbus's rules.

Be a hero. Do trust others. Take bold action.

Otherwise, the movie seems to indicate, things just stay the same; *zombies friggin' everywhere* (including the Capitol Dome). If someone doesn't do something brave soon, we're all just going to forever remain—in the explicit lingo of the movie—“orphans in *Zombieland*.”

Zombieland is a timely reminder of 2008's optimistic “Yes We Can-ism.” If Wichita can learn to trust; if Columbus can form a functional social circle and become a hero, and if Tallahassee can learn to connect to other people ... what the hell are *we* waiting for on health care, on the environment, on reducing the deficit, global warming or on national security?

To use an historical antecedent, *Zombieland* is to the 2000s what Dan O'Bannon's *Return of the Living Dead* was to the Reagan 1980s. It's a wolf in sheep's clothing, a horror comedy that serves as a scathing commentary on our culture. In particular, it bemoans our cultural paralysis and inability to handle big problems. The visuals are also punchy, dynamic, funny, and technically interesting, particularly in a “pop-up” approach to remembering Columbus's all-important rules.

As *Zombieland* might remind us at this juncture, it is time to *Nut Up or Shut Up*.

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IV

Conclusion

The 2000s ended with the return of at least a little hope in America. The Great Recession waned. The War on Terror was ending, finally. But still, reactionary force also gathered to “*take back the country*.”

As usual, two steps forward meant one step back.

In terms of horror films, two new trends impacted their survival and good health as the decade turned. The first was the beginning of “shared universe” movies. In 2008, Marvel had launched its MCU (Marvel Comics Universe) with *Iron Man*. In the 2010s, movies such as *Thor* (2011) and *Captain America* (2011) expanded that universe, and superhero fantasy movies dominated theaters and the American box-office for years. This escapism, similar to the glut of western films in the 1930s—1950s, changed the shape of horror films in unexpected ways. A shared horror universe came to be too, depicting highly-fictionalized versions of real life paranormal investigators Hal and Lorraine Warren, in efforts such as *The Conjuring* (2013), *The Conjuring 2* (2016), *Annabelle* (2014), *Annabelle: Creation* (2017), *Annabelle Comes Home* (2019) and *The Nun* (2018).



The 2010s brought dozens of big-budget superhero films, and the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe). Pictured here is Iron Man from the 2008 film of the same name.

These films were popular, but by and large served as “episodes” in a continuing series, rather than as horror cinema, where anything could—and often did—happen. There was also an attempt to launch the Universal Monsters into a shared universe, but the failure of the first film in the franchise, *The Mummy* (2017), took that notion off the table, at least for a few years (until the arrival of 2020s *The Invisible Man*).

Horror films seemed oddly out of step with the 2010s, and most of the films released during that span were “prestige” one-offs that earned good reviews but didn’t necessarily meet with widespread popular success. There films had titles such as *It Follows* (2014), *The Babadook* (2014), *The Witch* (2015), and *Hereditary* (2018) to name a few. All these films were thoughtful and worthwhile but met with mixed feelings from long-term horror movie fans.

The 2010s also saw the fall of the *Saw* series, which had run out of gas with *Saw 3D* (2010) and

attempted yet another revival in 2017 with *Jigsaw*. The overall feeling seemed to be that torture porn had seen its day, and that in the 2010s, that day was over, save for the occasional effort like *The Human Centipede* (2010).

Remakes also fell out of favor, with a rebooted *Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010) meeting widespread disdain from fans. By contrast, prequels continued to have their day, in efforts such as *The Thing* (2011), *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017), but again, the feeling was that some of these efforts had lost their luster.

The reboot craze seemed to end as well. Rob Zombie's *Halloween* timeline ended without a third chapter, and the franchise decided instead to proceed with a direct sequel to Carpenter's original. *Halloween* (2018) saw the triumphant return of Laurie Strode, a character that had died in 2002's *Halloween: Resurrection*, in the form of a 60-year-old Jamie Lee Curtis.

In short, horror films seemed a bit lost in the decade following the 2000s, not certain what "next trend" to seize on. Only cheap jack, but occasionally brilliant, found footage movies seemed guaranteed an audience as the *Paranormal Activity* sequels took off in the first part of the decade.

The 2010s also represented the end of an era in terms of the great horror directors of generations past. Wes Craven passed away in 2015. George A. Romero and Tobe Hooper passed away in 2017. Of the maestros of the 1970s, only John Carpenter was left standing, and he made only one film in the 2010s, *The Ward* (2010). The old masters exited, and there were no new icons to replace them.

The second trend that impacted horror films in the 2000s involved television. A shift had begun happening in the 2000s, but it was complete in the 2010s. Film and TV switched places. The fracturing of the TV audience, first via Cable TV, and later via Streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu, meant that, for the first time, television could create "niche" products; series that didn't have to be guaranteed a third of the entire watching audience to be considered a success.

Films, meanwhile, had to be ever more generic to survive competitive opening weekends, as the long-standing blockbuster model engineered in the 1970s by films such as *Jaws* finally cannibalized the film industry. A movie that cost 250 million dollars had to make 800 million dollars to succeed. On TV, by contrast, a viewing audience of two to three million guaranteed multiple seasons.

In this new environment of niche TV, horror thrived. *The Walking Dead* (2010–), a series about a zombie apocalypse, and one which George Romero once famously referred to as a soap opera, rose to heights of popularity that no horror series since *The X-Files* had attained. *The X-Files* also returned for two limited series (in 2016 and 2018), and other horror programs such as *The Strain* (2014–2017) also rose. Horror movie fans disenchanted by the high-brow offerings of the 2010s, such as *Goodnight, Mommy* (2014), found more traditional genre fare on the tube.



The cast of the popular AMC series *The Walking Dead* (2010–2021).

Meanwhile, the very nature of the culture changed. *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), a fantasy series, was gorier and more violent than any *Friday the 13th* film ever produced, and yet readily available to children for streaming. It featured rape, castration, decapitation and other horrors on a regular basis, and the culture that had derided slashers and torture porn did not bat an eye.

Given all these tumults, the 2000s was likely the end of an era, not just in terms of the decade itself. The passing of the 1970s maestros, the inversion of TV and movie roles in mainstream entertainment, and the supplanting of horror as a popular genre by endless superhero efforts, all posed an existential threat to the horror movie tradition in ways not imagined during the War on Terror.

For the first time since 1980, not a single *Friday the 13th* film was released in the decade 2010–2020.

The times, they were changing. But that's the subject for another book.

Appendix A: 2000s Horror Conventions

In the 2000s several specific clichés and themes were repeated across a wide array of horror films. In the decade of “W,” these scenarios eventually became as ubiquitous as the Kardashians in the pop culture media.

For a convention to appear listed below, it must have recurred at least three times during the span between 2000 and 2009.

Aliens

The 2000s, and especially the post-9/11 years brought all varieties of evil alien invaders to Earth to threaten humankind. New and improved special effects, and the terrorist attacks of September 11 provided filmmakers the opportunity and context to stage invasions in more immediate and destructive terms than ever before.

John Carpenter’s Ghosts of Mars (2001)

Signs (2002)

Dreamcatcher (2003)

AVP (2004)

AVP: Requiem (2007)

The Invasion (2007)

Cloverfield (2008)

The Fourth Kind (2009)

American Flag

In the post-9/11 era Old Glory, the American flag, appeared more often in horror films than in any previous decade. The era was one first of renewed national pride and patriotism, as America rallied behind George W. Bush in the War on Terror, following the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Then, as the war went badly, the appearance of the flag was often used ironically. America, in practicing torture and indefinite incarceration of enemy combatants in defiance of the Geneva Conventions, had sacrificed part of her soul. So, when the American flag appears in horror films of this decade, it is either used patriotically, ironically (for purposes of juxtaposition between ideal and reality), or in, perhaps one, final way.

Many horror films in the 2000s moved production to Eastern Europe to save costs during the decade. These films were supposed to be set in America but starred non-Americans and featured foreign locations doubling as the American south, or other U.S. region. Often, American flags were slapped on walls or other locations to suggest the location was, in fact, the U.S., when every other indication suggested the opposite.

The Cell (2000)

Cherry Falls (2000)

Children of the Corn: Revelations (2001)

Session 9 (2001)

Wendigo (2001)

American Psycho 2: All American Girl (2002)

Below (2002)

House of 1,000 Corpses (2002)
The Mangler 2 (2002)
Red Dragon (2002)
Wishmaster 4: The Prophecy Fulfilled (2002)
Cold Creek Manor (2003)
Dreamcatcher (2003)
House of the Dead (2003)
Identity (2003)
Leprechaun Back 2 Tha Hood (2003)
Mimic 3 (2003)
Resident Evil: Apocalypse (2004)
Secret Window (2004)
Cursed (2005)
Cry_Wolf (2005)
The Fog (2005)
Feast (2006)
The Hills Have Eyes (2006)
I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer (2006)
Mulberry Street (2006)
Open Water: Adrift (2006)
The Wicker Man (2006)
1408 (2007)
Pumpkinhead: Blood Feud (2007)
Rise: Blood Hunter (2007)
Skinwalkers (2007)
30 Days of Night (2007)
The Alphabet Killer (2008)
Otis (2008)
The Rage (2008)
Rest Stop: Don't Look Back (2008)
Saw V (2008)
Splinter (2008)
Vacancy 2: The First Cut (2008)
Blood Creek (2009)
Boogeyman 3 (2009)
From Within (2009)
The Hills Run Red (2009)
Sorority Row (2009)
Wrong Turn 3: Left for Dead (2009)

Asthma and Inhalers

This health condition played a crucial role in horror films of the 2000s. Often, horror films featured children with breathing difficulties who required an inhaler to survive. Of course, the inhaler was often not available, which required parents to go into danger to acquire it. Asthma, a health condition, was a reminder in 2000s films that society or civilization was built on the idea of effective infrastructure (such as healthcare or medicine) which, during an apocalypse or other dangerous situation, would not be available to provide support.

Signs (2002)
Mimic 3 (2003)
Hostel (2005)

Skinwalkers (2007)

30 Days of Night (2007)

The Alphabet Killer (2008)

One Missed Call (2008)

The Asylum

A number of horror films from the 2000s were set at—or partially set—at mental institutions, otherwise known as sanitariums or asylums. Sometimes the facilities were haunted. Other times they housed protagonists whom society no longer wanted to see or contend with. The sanitarium as a central location in horror films of the 2000s was a recognition of the fact that mental health was still not treated on parity with physical health during the decade, and that, in general, America's for-profit health system was in ruins, serving the rich, run by corporations, and not really helping those who needed it most.

Lost Souls (2000)

From Hell (2001)

Session 9 (2001)

Halloween: Resurrection (2002)

Final Destination 2 (2003)

Gothika (2003)

The Butterfly Effect (2004)

Black Christmas (2006)

The Alphabet Killer (2008)

Prom Night (2008)

Breast Part of the Movie

The most common shot of 1980s horror is still around in the 2000s: the view of a young, nubile female removing her blouse and bra for the camera. To be included in this category, at least one breast (including nipple) must be displayed. This cliché was named in honor of the author's friend and father-in-law, Dr. Frank Leftwich, the former chair of the Biology Department at the University of Richmond, who coined the term, and who passed away in 2010.

Audition (2000)

Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2 (2000)

From Dusk Till Dawn 3: The Hangman's Daughter (2000)

Hollow Man (2000)

Wes Craven Presents Dracula 2000 (2000)

Bones (2001)

Children of the Corn: Revelations (2001)

The Forsaken (2001)

From Hell (2001)

Thir13en Ghosts (2001)

Wishmaster 3: Beyond the Gates of Hell (2001)

The Calling (2002)

Ghost Ship (2002)

Hellraiser: Hellseeker (2002)

House of 1,000 Corpses (2002)

Red Dragon (2002)

Wishmaster 4: The Prophecy Fulfilled (2002)

Cold Creek Manor (2003)

Freddy vs. Jason (2003)

House of the Dead (2003)

Final Destination 2 (2003)
Club Dread (2004)
Dead End (2004)
Fear of Clowns (2004)
Mr. Jingles (2004)
My Little Eye (2004)
Resident Evil: Apocalypse (2004)
Seed of Chucky (2004)
The Devil's Rejects (2005)
Doom (2005)
Hellraiser: Deader (2005)
Hellraiser: Hellworld (2005)
Hostel (2005)
High Tension (2005)
Land of the Dead (2005)
The Mangler Reborn (2005)
2001 Maniacs (2005)
Final Destination 3 (2006)
The Hills Have Eyes (2006)
Rest Stop (2006)
Saw 3 (2006)
Snakes on a Plane (2006)
Halloween (2007)
Return to the House on Haunted Hill (2007)
Shrooms (2007)
Wrong Turn 2: Dead End (2007)
Deadgirl (2008)
The Rage (2008)
Rest Stop: Don't Look Back (2008)
The Ruins (2008)
Teeth (2008)
Boogeyman 3 (2009)
Cabin Fever 2: Spring Fever (2009)
The Collector (2009)
The Hills Run Red (2009)
The Last House on the Left (2009)
Paranormal Entity (2009)
Sorority Row (2009)
Wrong Turn 3: Left for Dead (2009)

Cabin in the Woods

In the road-trip-gone awry or “wrong turn” movies, the cabin in the woods is the sanctuary in the place of terror.

Cabin Fever (2000)
Dreamcatcher (2003)
Wrong Turn (2003)
Secret Window (2004)
The Descent (2006)

The Car Won't Start

Automobiles of the 2000s, like those in previous decades, prove to be utterly unreliable in horror movies of this span. Cars should offer a handy method of escape for the protagonist, but oftentimes for no reason at all, simply fail to start. This convention typically reflects the idea in horror that technology won't save us.

Jeepers Creepers (2001)

Joy Ride (2001)

Tremors 3: Back to Perfection (2001)

Identity (2003)

The Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines (2003)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)

The Fog (2005)

High Tension (2005)

The Skeleton Key (2005)

Wolf Creek (2005)

Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon (2006)

Black Christmas (2006)

The Breed (2006)

Rest Stop (2006)

Silent Hill (2006)

Underworld: Evolution (2006)

When a Stranger Calls (2006)

The Hitcher (2007)

The Reaping (2007)

Them (2007)

Vacancy (2007)

Rest Stop: Don't Look Back (2008)

Vacancy 2: The First Cut (2008)

Friday the 13th (2009)

The Grudge 3 (2009)

The Cave

The world underneath; the world besides ours. A dark reflection, a dark underside. The cave can represent repressed memories, the Id, or the collective unconscious.

The Cave (2005)

The Cavern (2005)

The Descent (2006)

The Descent Part 2 (2009)

Cell Phone Is Dead/No Cell Reception

In the 2000s, cellular phones (and then, at the end of the decade, iPhones), were ubiquitous. This meant that on road trips, and other sojourns away from home, protagonists still had a way of securing help. Police, hospitals, best friends and others were just a phone call away now, when protagonists were confronted with a flat tire, or a psycho killer.

Horror films had to quickly adjust to this reality of ready communication at all times. They did so in the 2000s by including cell phones in their stories but taking characters to places where there was no reception. Or, the unlucky protagonists had forgotten to charge their cell phones, and when they needed to make calls their phones had no battery power.

Like cars that won't start, the cell phone that is dead, or not charged, is a reminder in horror films that technology is not a universal savior in times of terror.

What Lies Beneath (2000)
Jeepers Creepers (2001)
Tremors 3: Back to Perfection (2001)
The Mangler 2 (2002)
Cabin Fever (2003)
Cold Creek Manor (2003)
Identity (2003)
Jeepers Creepers 2 (2003)
Octane (2003)
The Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines (2003)
Wrong Turn (2003)
Dead End (2004)
Saw (2004)
The Fog (2005)
Cursed (2005)
Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon (2006)
The Breed (2006)
The Hills Have Eyes (2006)
The Wicker Man (2006)
Disturbia (2007)
The Hitcher (2007)
The Mist (2007)
Planet Terror (2007)
REC (2007)
The Signal (2007)
Vacancy (2007)
Wrong Turn 2: Dead End (2007)
The Cottage (2008)
Cloverfield (2008)
Day of the Dead (2008)
House (2008)
Quarantine (2008)
The Ruins (2008)
Saw V (2008)
The Strangers (2008)
Vacancy 2: The First Cut (2008)
Dead Snow (2009)
Evil Things (2009)
Friday the 13th (2009)
The Last House on the Left (2009)
Sorority Row (2009)
Wrong Turn 3: Left for Dead (2009)

CW/WB Horror Stars of the 2000s

The 2000s saw the attractive young and multitudinous TV stars of the WB/CW Network transition to cinematic horror films. This synergy led some cynics to refer to the 2000s as the decade of WB horror.

Jensen Ackles of *Supernatural* (2005–2020) in *My Bloody Valentine* (2009)
 Shiri Appleby of *Roswell* (1999–2002) in *Swimfan* (2002)
 Jason Behr of *Roswell* (1999–2002) in *The Grudge* (2004), *Skinwalkers* (2007)
 Kristen Bell of *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007) in *Pulse* (2006)

Jessica Biel of *Seventh Heaven* (1996–2006) in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Blade: Trinity* (2004)

Marc Blucas of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) in *Wes Craven Presents They* (2002)

David Boreanaz of *Angel* (1999–2005) in *Valentine* (2001)

Nicholas Brendon of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) in *Psycho Beach Party* (2000)

Emma Caulfield of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) in *Darkness Falls* (2003)

Erica Durance of *Smallville* (2001–2011) in *The Butterfly Effect 2* (2006)

Eliza Dushku of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) in *Soul Survivors* (2001), *Wrong Turn* (2003), *The Alphabet Killer* (2008)

Brendan Fehr of *Roswell* (1999–2002) in *The Forsaken* (2001), *The Covenant* (2006)

Scott Foley of *Felicity* (1998–2002) in *Scream 3* (2000), *Below* (2002)

Sarah Michelle Gellar of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in *The Grudge* (2004), *The Grudge 2* (2006), *The Return* (2006)

Katherine Heigl of *Roswell* (1999–2002) in *Valentine* (2001)

Katie Holmes of *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003) in *The Gift* (2000)

Joshua Jackson of *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003) in *Shutter* (2008)

Chad Michael Murray of *One Tree Hill* (2003–2012) in *House of Wax* (2005)

Jason Padelecki of *Supernatural* (2005–2020) in *Cry_Wolf* (2005), *House of Wax* (2005), *Friday the 13th* (2009)

Amanda Peet of *Jack and Jill* (1992–2001) in *Identity* (2003) and *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* (2008)

Emilie de Ravin of *Roswell* (1999–2002) in *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006)

Simon Rex of *Felicity* (1998–2002) in *The Forsaken* (2001)

Kerr Smith of *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003) in *Final Destination* (2000), *The Forsaken* (2001), *My Bloody Valentine* (2009)

Ian Somerhalder of *The Vampire Diaries* in *Pulse* (2006)

Scott Speedman of *Felicity* (1998–2002) in *Underworld* (2003), *Underworld: Evolution* (2005), *The Strangers* (2008)

Barry Watson of *Seventh Heaven* (1996–2006) in *Boogeyman* (2005)

Tom Welling of *Smallville* (2001–2011) in *The Fog* (2005)

Devils and Demons

With the end of the Millennium just passed, the horror films of the early 2000s often involved Satan or his demonic minions. The rise of the Anti-Christ was featured in a number of films produced before the War on Terror took center stage as a galvanizing influence of the decade.

Bless the Child (2000)

The Calling (2000)

Lost Souls (2000)

Darkness (2004)

Exorcist: The Beginning (2004)

Dominion: The Prequel to the Exorcist (2005)

The “Drag Me to Hell” or “Drag Away” Shot

The “Drag me to Hell” is the signature shot of the 2000s horror films and named for Sam Raimi’s 2009 movie. It involves, typically, a camera positioned flat on the floor, facing a character who has fallen and is on the ground. The character is prone, with face seen, close to the camera.

As this character struggles, a dark force yanks them away, and they recede from the foreground, dragged away by evil. The “Drag me to Hell” shot is a symbol of utter defeat and terror, as protagonists are pulled from the camera’s view, into complete, irrevocable darkness.

One of the best and most memorable of all “Drag me to Hell” shots occurs in the final seconds of

REC (2007). The “Drag me to Hell” emerged, in part, in the 2000s, because of the found footage genre. This film requires no survivors at the end, only the survival of the “footage” for law enforcement, the public, or enterprising editors to discover. The “Drag me to Hell” is thus the valedictory shot of the found footage format, as the final girl, who was once the only survivor, is pulled away, out of shot, out of audience view, by evil.

Dog Soldiers (2002)

Ginger Snaps: Unleashed (2004)

The Cave (2005)

The Cavern (2005)

Doom (2005)

The Descent (2006)

Mulberry Street (2006)

Rest Stop (2006)

Dead Silence (2007)

Disturbia (2007)

The Messengers (2007)

The Mist (2007)

REC (2007)

The Cottage (2008)

Quarantine (2008)

One Missed Call (2008)

The Rage (2008)

Boogeyman 3 (2009)

The Collector (2009)

Found Footage

Following the success of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), horror filmmakers went back to the found footage well regularly in the 2000s, with some fascinating variations on a theme.

Cloverfield (2008) revived the giant monster format as a found-footage film, and *REC* (2007) melded zombie films with this format. Viewers of the decade witnessed demons in found-footage format (*Paranormal Activity* [2007]), serial killers (*The Poughkeepsie Tapes* [2007]) and more. Even the old masters, such as George A. Romero, tried their hands at this innovative new format (*Diary of the Dead* [2007]). The found format, which features the camera man as a main character, shaky-cam footage, and first-person point of view, also made it unnecessary for any character to survive the movie, since the “found footage” was his or her legacy. The found footage format only grew in popularity into the 2010s.

The St. Francisville Experiment (2000)

Incident at Loch Ness (2004)

Noroi: The Curse (2005)

The Zombie Diaries (2006)

The Poughkeepsie Tapes (2007)

REC (2007)

Cloverfield (2008)

Diary of the Dead (2008)

Lake Mungo (2008)

Evil Things (2009)

Paranormal Activity (2009)

Paranormal Entity (2009)

God's Eye View

Along with the “Drag me to Hell” shot, the God’s Eye View proved itself one of the most commonly seen shots in the 2000s horror cinema. The God’s Eye View is an extreme high angle shot, filmed from a helicopter directly above the action by several hundred feet.

In this shot, a car often cuts through a forested landscape, or looks down a modern urban metropolis. The shot makes the object observed (a car, a person, a building) look absolutely tiny, like an ant. This high vantage point not only creates a sense of doom, isolation and entrapment, it creates the impression of an unseen force looking down on Earth and the film’s characters as if through a microscope lens.

In the 2000s, people wondered how God could allow an event like 9/11 to occur. Horror films became obsessed with the ideas of fate, destiny, and dark, otherworldly, or supernatural forces gazing down upon man in films such as *The Mothman Prophecies* (2003), or *Dead End* (2004).

Dreamcatcher (2003)

Mothman Prophecies (2003)

Dead End (2004)

Exorcist: The Beginning (2004)

The Descent (2006)

Silent Hill (2006)

Dead Silence (2007)

30 Days of Night (2007)

The Descent Part 2 (2009)

In Space, No One Can Hear You Scream

Event Horizon (1997), an outer space horror film that was *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) meets *Hellraiser* (1987) and *The Shining* (1980), failed at the box office but gained a cult following. By the 2000s, many filmmakers were following in the film’s footsteps by creating genre films set on other worlds, or aboard spaceships. *Supernova* (2001) was *Dead Calm* (1989) in space, *Ghosts of Mars* (2001) was *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) in space, and so on.

Pitch Black (2000)

Supernova (2000)

John Carpenter’s Ghosts of Mars (2001)

Sunshine (2007)

Pandorum (2009)

Iraq War: The Sequel

Operation Desert Storm occurred in 1991, but rather than involve America in “nation building,” President George H. W. Bush stopped short of taking out the dictator Saddam Hussein and marching on Baghdad. That task fell upon his son, President George W. Bush, by choice, in 2003, as the War on Terror got its second theater of combat. Horror movies responded quickly and used as character motivation and background the “high tech” war in Iraq.

The Hills Have Eyes (2006)

AVP: Requiem (2007)

The Hills Have Eyes 2 (2007)

Planet Terror (2007)

Wrong Turn 2: Dead End (2007)

Rest Stop: Don’t Look Back (2008)

Blood Creek (2009)

Herky-Jerky Ghosts

How does a ghost or apparition move? If the horror films of the 2000s are to be believed they do so as sped-up, slowed-down individuals who seem to break the traditional confines of time. The spirits are herky-jerky things, sometimes slow, sometimes fast. They may be inspired by similarly herky-jerky monsters in *Jacob's Ladder* (1990). If done poorly, the herky-jerky creatures look really, really silly.

The Ring (2002)

Gothika (2003)

Silent Hill (2006)

The Messengers (2007)

Hot Flashes

Throughout many 2000s horror movies, editors cut to quick “flashes” of gory and violent images in the midst of a scene, or even amidst the opening credits.

These flash cuts are an editor's trick, more often than not, in poorly shot films wherein there is not ample footage for scene transitions. The quick flashes or hot flashes serve as interstitials or transitions in this case. These “hot flashes” were big on TV at the time too, seen on horror series such as *Angel* (1999–2005), which would periodically cut to “hot flashes” of Los Angeles cityscapes.

Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2 (2000)

The Bone Snatcher (2003)

Gothika (2003)

Saw 2 (2005)

I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer (2006)

Day of the Dead (2008)

Interlopers

One of the most popular “monsters” of the 1990s was the usurping interloper, the dangerous individual who insinuated himself or herself into the life of a victim, using murder and violence to accomplish an evil agenda. The interloper returned in the 2000s, to a much smaller degree in a series of horror “thrillers” about malevolent individuals who would insert themselves into the lives of lovers, co-workers, of families, and so forth, for malicious reasons.

Swimfan (2002)

Cold Creek Manor (2003)

Orphan (2009)

The Stepfather (2009)

The Internet Search of Doom (Replaces Library of Doom)

Following its introduction in the 1990s the Internet search engine supplanted in the genre the old cliché of the 1970s/1980s of library research. The search engine convention became wildly popular in the 2000s, as Google ascended. Below are films which featured the Internet Search of Doom, and also the query searched for.

Valentine (2000): “Jeremy Melton.”

Gothika (2003): “Local girl commits suicide.”

Final Destination 2 (2003): “Death by sign.”

Cursed (2005): “Werewolf. L.A.”

The Butterfly Effect 2 (2006): “Dreams.”

Silent Hill (2006): “Silent Hill”

The Invasion (2007): “My husband isn’t my husband.”

Saw V (2008): “Seth...”

The X-Files: I Want to Believe (2008): “stem cell surgery.”

J-Remakes and Asian Remakes

One of the key trends in horror films of the 2000s is the Americanized remake of a Japanese, Korean or otherwise Asian film.

Most of the Asian films, and their remakes, involved technology as a portal of evil into the everyday world. *The Ring* (2002) involved a cursed video or VHS tape, *Pulse* (2006) involved ghosts bleeding into reality through cell phones, and *One Missed Call* (2008) also used telephones to depict a paranormal curse.

The Ring (2002)

The Grudge (2004)

Dark Water (2005)

Pulse (2006)

The Eye (2008)

Mirrors (2008)

One Missed Call (2008)

Shutter (2008)

The Uninvited (2009)

Last Chance Gas Station

The road trip gone wrong, or the “wrong turn”-style sub-genre was incredibly popular in the 2000s, again perhaps due to the attacks of 9/11, which stressed for many the seemingly random nature of life. Nearly 3,000 Americans went to work, or took a flight that day, expecting everything to be normal. But it was not normal. In the act of doing something normal, like reporting to the office for work, they were faced with the unimaginable.

The road-trip gone wrong trend goes back to the 1970s and films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) but had a new relevance at the start of the 21st century. The Last Chance Gas Station is a crucial ingredient in the “wrong turn” movie. It is the borderland between civilization and barbarity, between humanity and cruelty, between the normal and abnormal. The Last Chance Gas Station is the last place where characters, who detect changes such as creepy rednecks, can decide to turn back, and not venture forward. It is a threshold point.

Cold Creek Manor (2003)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)

Wrong Turn (2003)

Dead End (2004)

The Skeleton Key (2005)

2001 Maniacs (2005)

Wolf Creek (2005)

The Hills Have Eyes (2006)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning (2006)

Vacancy (2007)

Rest Stop: Don't Look Back (2008)

Splinter (2008)

Evil Things (2009)

Friday the 13th (2009)

The Hills Run Red (2009)

Let Them Eat Static, or White Noise

Named for Khan in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), this genre convention is all about visual noise. Often times in horror movies of the 2000s, especially those of the found footage variety, a film will cut to static or white noise as a transition. Static is a signal that communication has been terminated, or lost, and therefore another anti-technology message. When the screen goes to static, things are about to get a lot worse.

Octane (2003)

Saw (2004)

White Noise (2004)

Evil Things (2009)

Lost and Found (The Belongings Room or Drawer)

This convention is a staple of the road-trip-gone-awry or “wrong turn” type of horror film. These films feature characters who, on a trip or journey of some type, take a wrong turn into terror. They find, on that odyssey, that they are not the first to take this horrific detour. As they attempt to escape, they find evidence of previous sojourners—video cameras, drivers’ licenses, luggage, even cars—who were not lucky enough to escape from the horror.

Scream 3 (2000)

Octane (2003)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)

Wrong Turn (2003)

Wolf Creek (2005)

The Hills Have Eyes (2006)

Disturbia (2007)

Wrong Turn 2: Dead End (2007)

Men Behaving Badly (Or #MeToo)

More than a decade before the #MeToo movement got its name, horror films focused on men behaving badly: gaslighting, cheating, and molesting, and showed cosmic justice meted via the supernatural (*What Lies Beneath*, *Gothika*) in many instances.

Audition (2000)

The Gift (2000)

What Lies Beneath (2000)

Gothika (2003)

Shutter (2004)

Hard Candy (2005)

An American Haunting (2006)

Deadgirl (2008)

Shutter (2008)

Jennifer’s Body (2009)

Missing Person’s Board

One of the most heartbreaking aspects of life immediately after the 9/11 attacks involved the search for survivors. CNN and other 24-hour news channels featured footage of people handing out flyers looking for their loved ones. Americans saw bulletin boards filled with flyers seeking out information on missing people. The Missing Person’s Board soon became a staple of 2000s horror as well.

The Forsaken (2001)

Jeepers Creepers (2001)

Soul Survivors (2001)

Rest Stop (2006)

Slither (2006)

House (2008)

Rest Stop (2008)

Night Vision

A key visualization of the found footage format is the night vision “filter” on handheld video cameras. Used in the dark to see what the eye can’t detect, the night vision feature allows for the possibility of seeing what we are afraid of, lurking, unseen, to our eyes.

One of the most memorable jump scares of the entire decade comes in *The Descent* (2006), when a camera equipped and using night vision spies an inhuman cave-dweller standing in close proximity to one of the protagonists.

Another brilliant usage of night vision comes in *REC* (2007), when a TV news anchor is trapped alone in an apartment with something inhuman. Without the camera, and its night vision, she can’t see what lurks in the darkness.

Children of the Corn: Revelations (2001)

Tremors 3: Back to Perfection (2001)

Dog Soldiers (2002)

The Mangler 2 (2002)

My Little Eye (2004)

Land of the Dead (2005)

The Descent (2006)

Planet Terror (2007)

The Poughkeepsie Tapes (2007)

REC (2007)

Rise: Blood Hunter (2007)

Saw IV (2007)

Quarantine (2008)

The Descent Part 2 (2009)

Evil Things (2009)

Halloween 2 (2009)

Paranormal Entity (2009)

Wrong Turn 3: Left for Dead (2009)

Pandemic

Alas, this genre trope came true. A number of 2000s era movies features a plague traveling the world, often originating from the Far East. One film, *Carriers* (2009), especially got many of the details of COVID-19 correctly, though that is a questionable honor.

28 Days Later (2001)

Resident Evil (2002)

The Zombie Diaries (2006)

28 Weeks Later (2007)

Carriers (2009)

Pharmaceuticals

According to the National Center for Health Statistics in a report, "*Prescription Drug Use Continues to Increase: U.S. Prescription Drug Data for 2007–2008*," spending on pharmaceutical drugs in the United States was 234 billion dollars, double what it had been in 1999, less than ten years earlier. Furthermore, in 2007–2008, one in every five children and 9 out of 10 senior citizens reported using at least one prescription drug during the previous month.

These drugs were mostly asthma medications for children, central-nervous system stimulants for adolescents, anti-depressants for middle-aged adults, and cholesterol-lowering drugs for senior citizens.

What this means, in practice, is that by the 2000s America was a nation of pill-poppers, in every age demographic. Horror films which are always the canary in the coal mine, noted this trend, and many films of the era featured characters using drugs, but not necessarily street drugs but approved pharmaceuticals of sometimes frightening power.

These drugs could do everything from suppressing dreams (Hypnocil in *Freddy vs. Jason* [2003]) to calming anxiety (*Prom Night* [2008]). In cases when the drug is called out by name (real or fictional), it is featured below, after the title.

Pitch Black (2000)

Children of the Corn: Revelations (2001)

John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars (2001)

Vampires: Los Muertos (2002)

Darkness Falls (2003)

Freddy vs. Jason (2003): Hypnocil

Gothika (2003)

Octane (2003)

The Exorcism of Emily Rose (2005): Gambutrol

Urban Legends: Bloody Mary (2005)

The Invasion (2007)

Vacancy (2007): Zoloft/Prozac

The Alphabet Killer (2008)

Prom Night (2008): Klonopin

Remakes

In Hollywood, everything old is new again. And that goes especially for the horror genre, which in the 2000s saw many of its most popular, durable, and well-known titles remade for a new generation.

Thir13en Ghosts (2001)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)

Willard (2003)

Dawn of the Dead (2004)

Toolbox Murders (2004)

The Amityville Horror (2005)

The Fog (2005)

House of Wax (2005)

The Hills Have Eyes (2006)

The Omen 6 6 6 (2006)

When a Stranger Calls (2006)

The Wicker Man (2006)

Halloween (2007)

The Hitcher (2007)

The Invasion (2007)

April Fool's Day (2008)
Day of the Dead (2008)
Prom Night (2008)
Friday the 13th (2009)
Halloween 2 (2009)
It's Alive (2009)
Last House on the Left (2009)
My Bloody Valentine (2009)
Sorority Row (2009)

Reruns (or What's on the TV?)

Horror filmmakers tend to be individuals who have a wide knowledge and respect for the horror genre, but also film history. As scholars of horror and film tradition and history, they understand the concept of homage, of paying respect to films and filmmakers of yesteryear. Accordingly, often times they will shoot scenes in which characters interact in front of a television set, and then broadcast on that set is a film that is meaningful either to the filmmaker on a personal level, or which represents a thematic connection between the film on the TV, and the film being shot.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) in *American Psycho* (2000)
Fantastic Planet (1973) in *The Cell* (2000)
The Wolfman (1942) in *House of 1,000 Corpses* (2003)
The Breakfast Club (1985) in *My Little Eye* (2004)
Bride of the Monster (1958) in *The Devil's Rejects* (2005)
Pulp Fiction (1994) in *Hostel* (2005)
The Thing (1951) in *Halloween* (2007)
Bride of Frankenstein (1935) in *White Noise 2: The Light* (2007)
The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) in *Otis* (2008)
The House on Haunted Hill (1959) in *The Hills Run Red* (2009)
Night of the Living Dead (1951) in *House of the Devil* (2009)



The road trip gone wrong. Jordana Brewster in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006).

Road Trip Gone Wrong (or Wrong Turn)

In films of this type, travelers on a trip take a detour into terror. A form of the savage cinema, the “wrong turn” or “road trip gone wrong” movie features characters dealing with an unbelievable change in their reality. Life is normal and happy, but just one turn away is terror. That terror may be a cannibal family, mutants in the desert, or snuff-producing voyeurs at an out-of-the-way motel. This is one of the most commonly seen conventions/sub-genres seen in horror films of the 2000s.

The Forsaken (2001)

Jeepers Creepers (2001)

Joy Ride (2001)

Wendigo (2001)

Identity (2003)

Octane (2003)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)

Wrong Turn (2003)

Dead End (2004)

House of Wax (2005)

Wolf Creek (2005)

The Hills Have Eyes (2006)

Rest Stop (2006)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning (2006)

Shrooms (2007)

Vacancy (2007)

House (2008)

Splinter (2008)

Vacancy 2: The First Cut (2008)

Autopsy (2009)

Serial Killers

The serial killer replaced the slasher as the cinema’s most popular boogeyman in the 1990s, bringing along with him the police procedural milieu and the methodology for his destruction: forensic pathology. By the 2000s, the police procedural horror film was in decline, and new sub-genres rose, including found-footage films, and torture porn.

In the early years of the 2000s, in particular, some serial killer movies were still being made, though they sought new formats to avoid repeating the tired police-procedural. Some were pointed satire (*American Psycho* [2000]), some were fantasies (*The Cell* [2000]) and even a Hannibal Lecter film went the route of epic opera, in *Hannibal* (2001).

American Psycho (2000)

The Cell (2000)

The Watcher (2000)

Hannibal (2001)

American Psycho 2: All American Girl (2002)

Red Dragon (2002)

Saw (2004)

Saw II (2005)

Saw III (2006)

Hannibal Rising (2007)

Saw IV (2007)

The Alphabet Killer (2008)

Saw V (2008)

The Collector (2009)
Saw VI (2009)

Slashers

The neo-slasher movement began in 1996, with the release and popularity of Wes Craven's *Scream*. Before the decade was out, the neo-slasher had given fans such films (and franchises) as *Scream 2* (1997), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), and *Urban Legend* (1998).

The neo-slashers tended to be more ironic and self-referential than the original slasher films of the 1980s, which were highly-naturalistic in presentation. The neo-slashers, by contract, were post-modern, or "meta." The 2000s began with the neo-slashers still in full popularity, though the terrorist attacks of 9/11 caused a huge pivot in the nature of horror films and resulted in new directions that eschewed the ironic, sometimes campy new slashers.

Cherry Falls (2000)
Scream 3 (2000)
Urban Legends: Final Cut (2000)
Valentine (2000)
Club Dread (2004)
Cry_Wolf (2005)
I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer (2006)

The Stay Awake

A popular shot in the 1990s, the "stay awake" lived on in the post-9/11 world. What is it? The trademark after-the-nightmare shot in which a beleaguered protagonist awakes (usually in bed) and is depicted in close-up, all sweaty and bothered. This cliché is named for the terrible 1987 film *The Stay Awake*.

The Cell (2000)
Final Destination (2000)
Hollow Man (2000)
Leprechaun in the Hood (2000)
Scream 3 (2000)
Urban Legends: Final Cut (2000)
Wes Craven Presents Dracula 2000 (2000)
Bones (2001)
Children of the Corn: Revelation (2001)
Soul Survivors (2001)
Wendigo (2001)
Vampires: Los Muertos (2002)
Wishmaster 4: The Prophecy Fulfilled (2002)
Gothika (2003)
A Tale of Two Sisters (2003)
The Devil's Rejects (2004)
Exorcist: The Beginning (2004)
Fear of Clowns (2004)
Ginger Snaps: Unleashed (2004)
Mr. Jingles (2004)
Secret Window (2004)
Seed of Chucky (2004)
Shutter (2004)
The Toolbox Murders (2004)

The Amityville Horror (2005)
Cursed (2005)
Hellraiser: Hellworld (2005)
High Tension (2005)
The Ring Two (2005)
The Skeleton Key (2005)
2001 Maniacs (2005)
The Covenant (2006)
The Descent (2006)
I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer (2006)
The Return (2006)
Stay Alive (2006)
When a Stranger Calls (2006)
The Wicker Man (2006)
The Woods (2006)
Hannibal Rising (2007)
The Hitcher (2007)
The Number 23 (2007)
The Reaping (2007)
Rise: Blood Hunter (2007)
Skinwalkers (2007)
The Eye (2008)
The Haunting of Molly Hartley (2008)
Inside (2008)
Dead Snow (2009)
Drag Me to Hell (2009)
Halloween 2 (2009)
Triangle (2009)
Twilight: New Moon (2009)

Stephen King

The Master of Horror was still seeing films made from his books and short stories in the 2000s, though overall it was not a great time for the author.

The *Children of the Corn* series continued its descent in quality, begun in the 1990s, and *The Mangler* franchise did likewise. It would not be until the 2010s, and the success of a film adaptation of *It* (2017), that the King of Horror would see a major cinematic revival.

Children of the Corn: Revelation (2001)
The Mangler 2 (2002)
Dreamcatcher (2003)
Secret Window (2004)
The Mangler Reborn (2005)
1408 (2007)
The Mist (2007)

Threequel Is a Prequel

In the 2000s, the third chapter of a franchise (or second sequel), turned out to be a prequel to the earlier stories. One series that bucked the trend was *Tremors*, which only went back in time for its fourth installment.

From Dusk Till Dawn: The Hangman's Noose (2000)

Ginger Snaps 3 (2002)
Red Dragon (2002)
Underworld: Rise of the Lycans (2009)

Torture Porn (or “Gorno”)

This is the critically derided form of horror, that, according to its critics, lingers on sadism, dismemberment, and blood. Any fan of horror knows there is more to the story than that.

Saw (2004)
Hostel (2005)
Saw II (2005)
Rest Stop (2006)
Saw III (2006)
See No Evil (2006)
Captivity (2007)
Hostel Part II (2007)
Saw IV (2007)
Martyrs (2008)
Rest Stop: Don't Look Back (2008)
Saw V (2008)
The Strangers (2008)
The Collector (2009)
Saw VI (2009)

Vampires

Vampires underwent a massive change in the 1990s with the Southwestern Gothics of *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), and *John Carpenter's Vampires* (1998) as well as the signature Anne Rice adaptation, *Interview with a Vampire* (1994), which positioned vampires as Byronic heroes of a sort.

Even more change was to come for these long-lived and popular monsters in the 2000s. The Southwestern Gothics 1990s returned with direct-to-video sequels and new titles such as *The Forsaken* (2001). Vampires became gun-toting upper-class elite in the *Underworld* films (2003, 2005, and 2009), and then came *Twilight*.

The Twilight Saga was hugely divisive with horror films, and portrayed vampires as immigrants, essentially, in America, attempted to accommodate to human culture. The *Twilight* vampires were broody and angsty and glittered like gems in sunlight.

Dracula 2000 (2000)
From Dusk Till Dawn 3: The Hangman's Daughter (2000)
Shadow of the Vampire (2000)
The Forsaken (2001)
John Carpenter Presents Vampires: Los Muertos (2002)
Underworld (2003)
Dracula 3000 (2004)
Underworld: Evolution (2006)
Rise: Blood Hunter (2007)
Let the Right One In (2008)
Twilight (2008)
Twilight: New Moon (2009)
Underworld: Rise of the Lycans (2009)



Butterfly Effect (2004), Kayleigh's father (Eric Stoltz) records his children for nefarious reasons.

The Video Camera

The home video camera remained one of the most important tools in the arsenal of 2000s horror films. Virtually every protagonist on vacation (*Wolf Creek* [2005], *The Descent* [2007], *Evil Things* [2009]), shooting a documentary or news program (*REC* [2007]), partying (*The Fog* [2005], *Cloverfield* [2008]) or just living their lives, had a video camera with which to record their horrific experience.

Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2 (2000)

The Calling (2000)

Wes Craven Presents Dracula 2000 (2000)

Route 666 (2001)

Tremors 3: Back to Perfection (2001)

Hellraiser: Hellseeker (2002)

Red Dragon (2002)

Wishmaster 4: The Prophecy Fulfilled (2002)

Cold Creek Manor (2003)

House of the Dead (2003)

Octane (2003)

Resident Evil: Apocalypse (2004)

Saw (2004)

Seed of Chucky (2004)

The Cave (2005)

The Exorcism of Emily Rose (2005)

The Fog (2005)

Hard Candy (2005)

House of Wax (2005)

Wolf Creek (2005)

The Descent (2006)

The Hills Have Eyes (2006)

Rest Stop (2006)

Disturbia (2007)

The Hitcher (2007)

The Poughkeepsie Tapes (2007)

The Reaping (2007)

REC (2007)

Saw IV (2007)

Vacancy (2007)

White Noise 2: The Light (2007)

Wrong Turn 2: Dead End (2007)

April Fool's Day (2008)

Quarantine (2008)

Twilight (2008)

The Descent Part Two (2009)

The Hills Run Red (2009)

Video Game Movies

The movies in this convention either involve fictional video games in-universe (*Hellraiser: Hellworld* or *Stay Alive*, for example), or are based on popular commercial video games.

Resident Evil (2002)

House of the Dead (2003)

Alone in the Dark (2005)

Doom (2005)

Hellraiser: Hellworld (2005)

Silent Hill (2006)

Stay Alive (2006)

Werewolves

Like vampires, werewolves had a renaissance in the 2000s, though suffered often from poor CGI rendering. *Ginger Snaps* (2001) avoided this cliché, and also tied the female menses cycle to the cycles of the moon. It was a high point for lycanthropy in the decade.

Ginger Snaps (2001)

Dog Soldiers (2002)

Underworld (2003)

Ginger Snaps Unleashed (2004)

Ginger Snaps Back (2004)

Underworld: Evolution (2005)

Skinwalkers (2007)

Twilight: New Moon (2009)

Underworld: Rise of the Lycans (2009)

Zombies

Zombies are THE monster of the 2000s. Zombie films represent, more than anything, the collapse of society at large. And with a decade of natural disasters, economic recessions and terrorism, the aughts was a perfect decade for these monsters to come back to life. In the 2000s, they represented the ennui of Generation X (*Shaun of the Dead*) an outbreak after too much TV (*28 Days Later*), insurgents in an occupation (*28 Weeks Later*) and a virus of hatred spread by talk radio (*Pontypool*).

28 Days Later (2001)

Dawn of the Dead (2004)

Shaun of the Dead (2004)

Land of the Dead (2005)

The Zombie Diaries (2006)

Fido (2007)

Planet Terror (2007)

REC (2007)

28 Weeks Later (2007)

Day of the Dead (2008)

Deadgirl (2008)

Diary of the Dead (2008)

Dead Snow (2009)

Pontypool (2009)

Survival of the Dead (2009)

Appendix B: The 2000s Horror Hall of Fame

In the 2000s, there was a great conjoining of young, up-and-coming actors who starred in TV series on the WB/CW Networks. At the same time, horror legends such as Reggie Bannister, Robert Englund, Lance Henriksen, Kane Hodder and Tony Todd were still finding work, and good work during the decade. A new horror icon of the decade was actor Tobin Bell, who played John Kramer, the Jigsaw Killer in six *Saw* films.

To be included here, a performer must have appeared in at least three genre films during the decade of 2000–2009.

Reggie Bannister *Bubba Ho-Tep* (2003), *The Mangler Reborn* (2005), *The Rage* (2007)



A view of Hall of Famer Kate Beckinsale in *Vacancy* (2007).

Kate Beckinsale *Underworld* (2003), *Van Helsing* (2004), *Underworld: Evolution* (2006), *Vacancy* (2007), *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans* (2009)

Tobin Bell *Saw* (2004), *Saw II* (2005), *Saw III* (2006), *Boogeyman 2* (2007), *Saw IV* (2007), *Saw V* (2008), *Saw VI* (2009)

Kristen Cloke *Final Destination* (2000), *Willard* (2003), *Black Christmas* (2006)

Jeffrey Combs *FearDotCom* (2002), *Beyond Reanimator* (2003), *Return to the House on Haunted Hill* (2007)

Stephen Dorff *FearDotCom* (2002), *Cold Creek Manor* (2003), *Alone in the Dark* (2005)

David Dorfman *The Ring* (2002), *The Texas Chain-saw Massacre* (2003), *The Ring Two* (2005)

Brad Dourif *Seed of Chucky* (2004), *Halloween* (2007), *Halloween 2* (2009)



Eliza Dushku starred in several horror films of the aughts, including *Wrong Turn* (2003) and *The Alphabet Killer* (2008).

Eliza Dushku *Soul Survivors* (2001), *Wrong Turn* (2003), *The Alphabet Killer* (2008)

Idris Elba *The Reaping* (2007), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Prom Night* (2008)

Cary Elwes *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), *Saw* (2004), *The Alphabet Killer* (2008)

Robert Englund *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), *2001 Maniacs* (2005), *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006)



Nathan Fillion, here seen as Captain Mal Reynolds in *Serenity* (2005), appeared in a number of horror films of the 2000s.

Nathan Fillion *Dracula 2000* (2000), *Slither* (2006), *White Noise 2: The Light* (2007)

Brendan Fletcher *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning* (2004), *Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed* (2004), *Alone in the Dark* (2005)

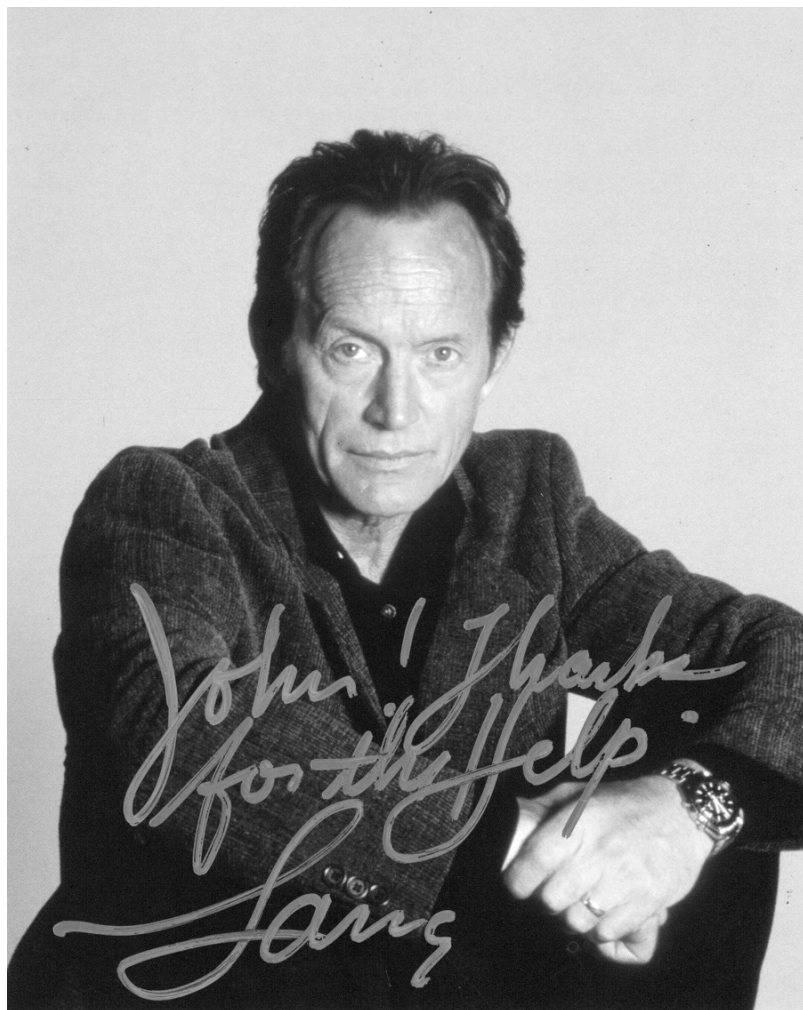


After her starring turn in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), Sarah Michelle Gellar headlined several horror films of the aughts.

Sarah Michelle Gellar *The Grudge* (2004), *The Grudge 2* (2006), *The Return* (2006)

Melissa George *The Amityville Horror* (2005), *30 Days of Night* (2007), *Triangle* (2009)

Sid Haig *House of 1,000 Corpses* (2003), *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), *Halloween* (2007)



The MVP of the 2000s? Lance Henriksen starred in several horror films of the 2000's, including *Scream 3* (2000), *When a Stranger Calls* (2005) and *Jennifer's Body* (2009).

Lance Henriksen *Scream 3* (2000), *Mangler 2* (2001), *Mimic 3* (2002), *Hellraiser: Hellworld* (2005), *When a Stranger Calls* (2006), *Pumpkinhead: Blood Feud* (2007), *Jennifer's Body* (2009)

Jay Hernandez *Hostel* (2005), *Hostel 2* (2007), *Quar-antine* (2008)

Kane Hodder *Jason X* (2001), *2001 Maniacs* (2005), *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006) *Hatchet* (2006)

Katharine Isabelle *Ginger Snaps* (2000), *Bones* (2001), *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning* (2004), *Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed* (2004)



Milla Jovovich launched the *Resident Evil* series and continued to star as Alice throughout the 2010s. She is pictured here in *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010).

Milla Jovovich *Resident Evil* (2002), *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004), *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007), *The Fourth Kind* (2009)

Elias Koteas *Lost Souls* (2000), *Skinwalkers* (2007), *The Fourth Kind* (2009), *The Haunting in Connecticut* (2009)

Ali Larter *Final Destination* (2000), *Final Destination 2* (2003), *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007)

Erica Leerhsen *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Wrong Turn 2: Dead End* (2007)

Justin Long *Jeepers Creepers* (2001), *Jeepers Creepers 2* (2003), *Drag Me to Hell* (2009)

Ryan Merriman *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002), *The Ring Two* (2005), *Final Destination 3* (2006)



Radha Mitchell starred in *Pitch Black* (2000), *Silent Hill* (2006) and *Rogue* (2008) in the 2000s.

Radha Mitchell *Pitch Black* (2000), *Silent Hill* (2006), *Rogue* (2008)

Rhona Mitra *Hollow Man* (2000), *The Number 23* (2007), *Skinwalkers* (2007), *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans* (2009)

Bill Moseley *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), *Halloween* (2007), *The Alphabet Killer* (2008), *House* (2008)

Jared Padalecki *Cry_Wolf* (2005), *House of Wax* (2005), *Friday the 13th* (2009)

Bijou Phillips *Octane* (2003), *Hostel Part II* (2007), *It's Alive* (2009)

Dominic Purcell *Blade: Trinity* (2004), *Primeval* (2007), *Blood Creek* (2009)

Norman Reedus *Blade II* (2002), *Octane* (2003), *Pandorum* (2009)

Wayne Robson *Cold Creek Manor* (2003), *Wrong Turn* (2003), *Wrong Turn 2: Dead End* (2007), *Survival of the Dead* (2009)

Peter Sarsgaard *The Cell* (2000), *The Skeleton Key* (2005), *Orphan* (2009)

Kerr Smith *Final Destination* (2000), *The Forsaken* (2001), *My Bloody Valentine* (2009)

Shawnee Smith *Saw* (2004), *Saw II* (2005), *Saw III* (2006), *The Grudge 3* (2009), *Saw 6* (2009)

Scott Speedman *Underworld* (2003), *Underworld: Evolution* (2005), *The Strangers* (2008)



Kristen Stewart starred in *Cold Creek Manor* (2003), *The Messengers* (2007), *Twilight* (2008), and *Twilight: New Moon* (2009) between 2000 and 2009.

Kristen Stewart *Cold Creek Manor* (2003), *The Messengers* (2007), *Twilight* (2008), *Twilight: New Moon* (2009)

Scout Taylor-Compton *Halloween* (2007), *April Fool's Day* (2008), *Halloween II* (2009)

Tony Todd *Final Destination* (2000), *Final Destination 2* (2003), *Hatchet* (2006)

Danny Trejo *From Dusk Till Dawn: The Hangman's Daughter* (2000), *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), *Grindhouse-Planet Terror* (2007), *Halloween* (2007)

Pruitt Taylor Vince *The Cell* (2000), *Identity* (2003), *Captivity* (2007)

Donnie Wahlberg *Dreamcatcher* (2003), *Saw II* (2005), *Saw III* (2006), *Dead Silence* (2007), *Saw IV* (2007)

Naomi Watts *The Ring* (2002), *The Ring Two* (2005), *Funny Games* (2007)

Jake Weber *The Cell* (2000), *Wendigo* (2001), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *The Haunting of Molly Hartley* (2008)

Kenneth Welsh *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Fog* (2005), *The Covenant* (2006), *Survival of the Dead* (2009)

Mary Elizabeth Winstead *The Ring Two* (2005), *Black Christmas* (2006), *Final Destination 3* (2006), *Death Proof* (2007)

Ray Wise *Jeepers Creepers 2* (2003), *Dead End* (2004), *One Missed Call* (2008)

Sheri Moon Zombie *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), *The Toolbox Murders* (2004), *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), *Halloween* (2007), *Halloween 2* (2009)

Appendix C: Memorable Ad-Lines

With horror movies boasting bigger budgets than ever before in the 2000s, the marketing of genre films became something of great importance during the decade. Snappy “tag lines” or “ad-lines” were the order of the day, in hopes of getting more warm bodies in theater seats (especially with such added at-home distractions like the Internet, and more advanced video games).

Below is a chronology (2000 to 2009) of some of the most memorable.

“Killer Looks”—*American Psycho* (2000)

“Fear the Darkness. Fight the Evil. Bless the Child.”—*Bless the Child* (2000)

“The myth is real.”—*Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000)

“Evil is dead. On the third day, it shall rise again.”—*The Calling* (2000)

“Enter the mind of a killer.”—*The Cell* (2000)

“If you haven’t had it, you’ve had it.”—*Cherry Falls* (2000)

“Reality bites!”—*Crocodile* (2000)

“The most seductive evil of all time has been released in ours.”—*Dracula 2000* (2000)

“Death is the Final Destination. Boarding starts now.”—*Final Destination* (2000)

“The terrifying new chapter in the Hellraiser legacy.”—*Hellraiser Inferno* (2000)

“What would you do if you knew you couldn’t be seen?”—*Hollow Man* (2000)

“Evil’s in the hood.”—*Leprechaun in the Hood* (2000)

“Deliver us from evil.”—*Lost Souls* (2000)

“Fight Evil with Evil.”—*Pitch Black* (2000)

“Party till you drop. Dead.”—*Psycho Beach Party* (2000)

“Someone has taken their love of trilogies one step too far.”—*Scream 3* (2000)

“An unspeakable horror. A creative genius. Captured for eternity.”—*Shadow of the Vampire* (2000)

“In the farthest reaches of space, something has gone terribly wrong.”—*Supernova* (2000)

“Cutting edge terror is back.”—*Urban Legends: Final Cut* (2000)

“They have the perfect marriage and the perfect house, until she found out what was wrong.”—*What Lies Beneath* (2000)

“This Dogg’s got a bone to pick.”—*Bones* (2001)

“The year is 1766 ... the hunt for a killer has begun.”—*Brotherhood of the Wolf* (2001)

“The all-new, terror filled chapter!”—*Children of the Corn: Revelation* (2001)

“Dark. Darker. Darko.”—*Donnie Darko* (2001)

“The night has an appetite.”—*The Forsaken* (2001)

“They don’t call it the curse for nothing.”—*Ginger Snaps* (2001)

“The silence will be broken.”—*Hannibal* (2001)

“Evil gets an upgrade.”—*Jason X* (2001)

"What's eating you?" —*Jeepers Creepers* (2001)

"It's their planet. We are the aliens." —*John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars* (2001)

"It started as a joke. Now the joke is on them." —*Joy Ride* (2001)

"You've been mangled." —*The Mangler 2* (2001)

"They thought the terror was over." —*Mimic 2* (2001)

"Do you believe in ghosts? She didn't..." —*The Others* (2001)

"One way in. No way out." —*Route 666* (2001)

"Fear is a place." —*Session 9* (2001)

"What's more terrifying than a ghost. Thirteen of them." *Thir13en Ghosts* (2001)

"The food chain just grew another link." —*Tremors 3* (2001)

"Some myths are real." —*Wendigo* (2001)

"Three wishes. One nightmare." —*Wishmaster 3: Beyond the Gates of Hell* (2001)

"When Evil strikes, one man still has the edge." —*Blade 2* (2002)

"Some secrets should never come to light." —*Darkness* (2002)

"Six Soldiers. Full Moon. No chance." —*Dog Soldiers* (2002)

"Let the squashing begin." —*Eight Legged Freaks* (2002)

"The last site you'll ever see." —*Fear dot com* (2002)

"Sea Evil." —*Ghost Ship* (2002)

"Evil finds its way home." —*Halloween: Resurrection* (2002)

"Be careful. She might just take your heart." —*May* (2002)

"The Mother of all Vampires." —*Queen of the Damned* (2002)

"To understand the origin of Evil, you must go back to the beginning." —*Red Dragon* (2002)

"Survive the Horror." —*Resident Evil* (2002)

"Before you die, you see The Ring." —*The Ring* (2002)

"It's happening." —*Signs* (2002)

"Are you afraid of the dark? You should be." *They* (2002)

"The days are numbered." —*28 Days Later* (2002)

"Leave no soul unturned." —*Wishmaster 4* (2002)

"Inject life into the dead." —*Beyond Re-Animator* (2003)

"It will scare you out of your skull." —*The Bone Snatcher* (2003)

"You know the legends. Now learn the truth." —*Bubba Ho-Tep* (2003)

"Cabin Fever ... catch it!" —*Cabin Fever* (2002)

"Stay in the light!" —*Darkness Falls* (2003)

"Read the Signs." —*Dead End* (2003)

"Evil slips through." —*Dreamcatcher* (2003)

"Even death gets a sequel." *Final Destination 2* (2003)

"Evil will battle evil." —*Freddy vs. Jason* (2003)

"Because someone is dead doesn't mean they are gone." —*Gothika* (2003)

"The dead walk. You run." —*House of the Dead* (2003)

"God bless this house." —*House of 1,000 Corpses* (2003)

Time destroys everything.”—*Irreversible* (2003)

“Like a bat out of Hell.”—*Jeepers Creepers 2* (2003)

“Evil has a whole new rap.”—*Leprechaun: Back 2 Tha’ Hood* (2003)

“Terror has been re-invented!”—*Mimic 3: Sentinel* (2003)

“Driven by Evil.”—*Octane* (2003)

“Every family has its dark secret.”—*A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003)

“The machines will rise.”—*Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003)

“Inspired by a true story.”—*Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003)

“An immortal battle for supremacy.”—*Underworld* (2003)

“A new breed of friendship.”—*Willard* (2003)

“It’s the last one you’ll ever take.”—*Wrong Turn* (2003)

“Whoever wins ... we lose.”—*Alien vs. Predator* (2004)

“The hunters will become the hunted.”—*Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid* (2004)

“He’s fought the forces of darkness alone ... until now.”—*Blade: Trinity* (2004)

“Change one thing, change everything.”—*The Butterfly Effect* (2004)

“A vacation to die for.”—*Club Dread* (2004)

“When the undead rise, civilization will fall.”—*Dawn of the Dead* (2004)

“In space, the sun never rises.”—*Dracula 3000* (2004).

“A new chapter of evil.”—*Exorcist: The Beginning* (2004)

“Laugh and you’re dead.”—*Fear of Clowns* (2004)

“Remember”—*Forgotten* (2004)

“Find the source of your fear.”—*Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning* (2004)

“Evil Bites.”—*Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed* (2004)

“It never forgives. It never forgets.”—*The Grudge* (2004)

“Wait until you see the final cut.”—*The Last Horror Movie* (2004)

“I spy with my little eye: who will live, and who will die?”—*My Little Eye* (2004)

“Don’t get left behind.”—*Open Water* (2004)

“You’re all going to die.”—*Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004)

“I want to play a game.”—*Saw* (2004)

“Get a load of Chucky.”—*Seed of Chucky* (2004)

“A romantic comedy. With zombie.”—*Shaun of the Dead* (2004)

“If you lived here, you’d be dead by now.”—*The Toolbox Murders* (2004)

“A revolution has begun.”—*Tremors 4* (2004)

“The one name they all fear.”—*Van Helsing* (2004)

“There is no turning back.”—*The Village* (2004)

“Based on the true story.”—*The Amityville Horror* (2005)

“You thought it was just a story. But it’s real.”—*Boo-geyman* (2005)

“Taking terror to a whole new depth.”—*The Cave* (2005)

“Some areas should never be explored.”—*The Cavern* (2005)

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."—*Cursed* (2005)

"Nobody believes a liar. Even when they are telling the truth."—*Cry_Wolf* (2005)

"Some mysteries were never meant to be solved."—*Dark Water* (2005)

"This summer, go to Hell!"—*The Devil's Rejects* (2005)

"Hell breaks loose."—*Doom* (2005)

"What happened to Emily?" *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005)

"The past has come back to haunt them."—*The Fog* (2005)

"Strangers shouldn't talk to little girls."—*Hard Candy* (2005)

"Evil goes online."—*Hellraiser: Hellworld* (2005)

"Welcome to your worst nightmare." *Hostel* (2005)

"The flesh is weak. Wax is forever."—*House of Wax* (2005)

"The dead shall inherit the Earth."—*Land of the Dead* (2005)

"The massacre continues."—*The Mangler Reborn* (2005).

"When the dead break free, all Hell breaks loose."—*Mortuary* (2005)

"The dead don't sleep." *The Ring Two* (2005)

"New game. Different pieces."—*Saw 2* (2005)

"The south will rise again."—*2001 Maniacs* (2005)

"Turn off the lights and see what happens."—*Urban Legend: Bloody Mary* (2005)

"Based on true events."—*Wolf Creek* (2005)

"Prepare to be altered."—*Altered* (2006)

"Possession knows no bounds."—*An American Haunting* (2006)

"Jason. Freddy. Michael. We all need someone to look up to."—*Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006)

"This season, the slay ride begins."—*Black Christmas* (2006)

"Play Dead"—*The Breed* (2006)

"To save the future, they must battle their past."—*The Covenant* (2006)

"Scream your last breath."—*The Descent* (2006)

"He'll steal your heart. Or eat it."—*Fido* (2006)

"This Ride Will Be the Death of You."—*Final Destination 3* (2006)

"What was once trapped will now be unleashed."—*The Grudge 2* (2006)

"They will be the last thing they ever see."—*The Hills Have Eyes* (2006)

"Monsters are real."—*The Host* (2006)

"Get hooked."—*I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer* (2006)

"He's here with an axe to grind."—*Mr. Jingles* (2006)

"His Day Will Come"—*The Omen 6-6-6* (2006)

"Fatigue. Hypothermia. Death"—*Open Water 2: Adrift* (2006)

"You are now infected." *Pulse* (2006)

"To the victor goes the spoils."—*Saw 3* (2006)

"This summer, someone is raising Kane."—*See No Evil* (2006)

"Some towns should never be entered."—*Silent Hill* (2006)

"Horror has a new face."—*Slither* (2006)

"Sit back. Relax. Enjoy the fright."—*Snakes on a Plane* (2006)

"Play it to death."—*Stay Alive* (2006)

"The past never dies. It kills."—*The Return* (2006)

"Witness the birth of fear."—*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006)

"A new race, a new battle, a new hero..."—*Underworld: Evolution* (2006)

"Whatever you do, don't answer the phone" —*When a Stranger Calls* (2006)

"Some sacrifices must be made."—*The Wicker Man* (2006)

"Private school. Deadly lessons."—*The Woods* (2006)

"This Christmas, there will be no peace on Earth."—*Alien s. Predator: Requiem* (2007)

"Temptation comes in many forms."—*Blood and Chocolate* (2007)

"You scream. You die."—*Dead Silence* (2007)

"White hot terror at 200 MPH!"—*Death Proof* (2007)

"Enjoy your stay."—*1408* (2007)

"The game is simple. Pick a family. Pick a victim."—*Funny Games* (2007)

"Evil has a destiny."—*Halloween* (2007)

"It started with revenge."—*Hannibal Rising* (2007)

"Terror goes old school."—*Hatchet* (2006)

"There are fates worse than death."—*The Hills Have Eyes 2* (2007)

"Never pick up strangers."—*The Hitcher* (2007)

"The last man on Earth is not alone."—*I Am Legend* (2007)

"Don't let her inside."—*Inside* (2007)

"Don't trust anyone. Do not show emotion. Do not fall asleep."—*The Invasion* (2007)

"Belief divides them. Mystery surrounds them. But fear changes everything."—*The Mist* (2007)

"The last thing his victims saw was his camera."—*The Poughkeepsie Tapes* (2007)

"The hunt begins soon."—*Primeval* (2007)

"Just one witness: a video camera."—*REC* (2007)

"What hath God wrought?"—*The Reaping* (2007)

"The extinction is coming."—*Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007)

"The welcome mat is out. Do come in."—*Return to the House on Haunted Hill* (2007)

"They didn't leave her alive. They left her undead."—*Rise: Blood Hunter* (2007)

"You think it is over, but the games have just begun."—*Saw IV* (2007)

"Beauty cannot last, but death is forever."—*Sick Nurses* (2008)

"The beast waits within."—*Skinwalkers* (2007)

"Dark days are coming."—*Sunshine* (2007)

"They're coming."—*30 Days of Night* (2007)

"If you don't follow the rules tonight, you won't live to see tomorrow."—*Trick 'R' Treat* (2007)

"It's not over."—*28 Weeks Later* (2007)

"Once you've checked in, the terror begins."—*Vacancy* (2007)

"Dinner is served."—*Wrong Turn 2: Dead End* (2007)

"It's gonna be a killer party."—*April Fool's Day* (2008)

"Evil cuts both ways."—*Autopsy* (2008)

"Evil will surface."—*The Burrowers* (2008)

"You brought them into this world. Now they will take you out."—*The Children* (2008)

"Something has found us."—*Cloverfield* (2008)

"Sleeps six bloody comfortably."—*The Cottage* (2008)

"D-Day is coming."—*Day of the Dead* (2008)

"The American nightmare."—*Deadgirl* (2008)

"Where will you be when the end begins."—*Diary of the Dead* (2008)

"Horror is just next door."—*Eden Lake* (2008)

"You won't believe her eyes."—*The Eye* (2008)

"We've Sensed it. We've Seen the Signs. Now, it's Hap-pening."—*The Happening* (2008)

"This Halloween, High School can be Hell."—*The Haunting of Molly Hartley* (2008)

"The guilty cannot hide."—*House* (2008)

"If you've never seen a ghost ... look closer."—*Lake Mungo* (2008)

"Eli is 12 years old. She's been 12 for over 200 years, and she moved in next door."—*Let the Right One In* (2008)

"They haven't finished being alive."—*Martyrs* (2008)

"The most terrifying ride you'll ever take."—*The Midnight Meat Train* (2008)

"There is Evil ... on the Other Side."—*Mirrors* (2008)

"What will it sound like when you die?"—*One Missed Call* (2008)

"A night to Die for."—*Prom Night* (2008)

"Contain the truth."—*Quarantine* (2008)

"Terror has evolved."—*The Ruins* (2008)

"In the end, all the pieces will fit together."—*Saw V* (2008)

"The Gates of Hell are open."—*Seventh Moon* (2008)

"The most terrifying images are the ones that are real."—*Shutter* (2008)

"It will get under your skin."—*Splinter* (2008)

"Inspired by real events."—*The Strangers* (2008)

"Forever. Begins. Now."—*Twilight* (2008)

"Believe Again."—*The X-Files: I Want to Believe* (2008)

"Chaos Reigns"—*Antichrist* (2009)

"This time it's spreading."—*Cabin Fever 2: Spring Fever* (2009)

"The rules are simple. You break them, you die."—*Carriers* (2009)

"He always takes one."—*The Collector* (2009)

"Fear runs deep. Revenge runs deeper."—*The Descent 2* (2009)

"Christine Brown has a good job, a great boyfriend, and a bright future. But in three days, she's going to Hell."—*Drag Me to Hell* (2009)

"Death saved the best for 3D."—*The Final Destination* (2009)

"Based on the actual case studies."—*The Fourth Kind* (2009)

"You know his name. You know the story. On Friday the 13th, witness his resurrection."—*Friday the 13th* (2009)

"Family is forever."—*Halloween 2* (2009)

"Some things cannot be explained."—*The Haunting in Connecticut* (2009)

"Talk on the phone. Finish your homework. Watch TV. Die."—*The House of the Devil* (2009)

"A baby's thoughts aren't always innocent."—*It's Alive* (2009)

"If someone hurt someone you love, how far would you go to get revenge?"—*The Last House on the Left* (2009)

"Don't mess with Mother Nature."—*Lost Weekend* (2009)

"She's evil, but not just high school evil."—*Jennifer's Body* (2009)

"Get your heart broken."—*My Bloody Valentine 3-D* (2009)

"There's something wrong with Esther."—*Orphan* (2009)

"Don't fear the end of the world. Fear what happens next."—*Pandorum* (2009)

"Warning: Actual crime scene footage. Contains violent and disturbing images."—*Paranormal Entity* (2009)

"Trust in Him."—*Saw VI* (2009)

"Survival isn't just for the living."—*Survival of the Dead* (2009)

"The Forecast is Evil."—*Triangle* (2009)

"The Next Chapter Begins."—*Twilight: New Moon* (2009)

"Our land is their land."—*Zombieland* (2009)

Appendix D: The Ten Best Horror Films of the 2000s

While writing this book, this author screened roughly three hundred films released between 2000 and 2009. Although long-time horror fans may not view the 2000s as the era of great creativity and classic films compared to the 1970s, or 1980s, they will likely agree that the films of the first decade of the 21st century are superior to those released in the 1990s.

For one thing, the 2000s—for the first time since the 1980s and the rise of the slasher movement, perhaps—began to consistently play with new forms, and new structures, like found footage films, torture porn, remakes, or horrors based on Asian or Japanese stories. The horror films of the 2000s, even when they weren't always good, nonetheless felt less scattershot than the efforts of the previous decade. Where the 1990s had shied away from horror, with more mainstream monsters like the serial killer and the Interloper, the 2000s doubled down on the horrific, to such an extent that the genre, at times, felt humorless.

Many films in this book were rated with the highest ranking, four stars, which makes it difficult to select just ten for inclusion here. The films that made this select list are ones that shattered old conventions, crafted new ones, or impacted the American culture in a lasting, or meaningful fashion.

The first choice may enrage or irritate some horror fans. Yet despite its PG-13 rating, the American version of *The Ring* (2002) is a genuinely terrifying film. The imagery of Samara, long hair occluding her water-soaked visage, crawling out of the TV is now a staple (often parodied) of the American pop culture. The film perfectly captures the 2000s era dread of technology, and the idea that something inimical or damaging might be broadcast during the 24-hour cable news cycle.

Structured as a mystery, the film opens and closes strong. In the former case, the video tape that kills within seven days is introduced in horrific fashion, like a twisted urban legend. In the latter case, the unexpected death of Martin Henderson's character at Samara's hands is a sustained tour-de-force of terror, and an acknowledgment that Samara's signal can't be stopped. Instead, it is always spreading. *The Ring* is different than its source material, *Ringu* (1998), perhaps not better, but the remake captures an unforgettable moment and time in the American horror cinema.

Joel Siegel, a TV critic from the 1980s, once made a comment that I have never forgotten. He said, in his review of James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), that the last hour of the movie was like attending a Bruce Springsteen concert ... *inside the bass drum*. My second choice on this top ten list is a film that also feels like attending a Springsteen concert from inside the bass drum: *REC* (2007).

This zombie/found-footage film demonstrates the versatility and flexibility of the found footage format and feels throat-clawingly claustrophobic. All the action occurs in one night, in a closed apartment building, as a zombie apocalypse develops. The movie captures the War on Terror fear of government authority, and the ubiquitous presence of news crews at the site of a tragedy or breaking story. However, the movie, which never moves at anything less than a breathless speed, also innovates in term of its threat. The zombies here are created not by science, but by the blood of a demonically possessed girl. The last five minutes of the film, set in the dark penthouse apartment where this girl dwells in the attic, is scary enough to make one's hair go gray after watching.

The low budget *Session 9* (2001) make the third slot on the list. With apologies to Stanley Kubrick, this effort succeeds where *The Shining* failed, creating a tale of personal apocalypse and terror that could be interpreted in two ways. Either *Session 9* is the story of a man, Gordon, who, through exhaustion and fatigue, has a psychotic break, or it is the story of a supernatural and haunted place, a ruined mental hospital.

Either way, the film is taut, accomplished, and unceasingly scary. America's haunted past is both the subtext and the galvanizing, unseen force in the film. With a new baby at home, and shorn of sleep,

Gordon must underbid on the job he needs, in an attempt to stay in business. His mental health, clearly, suffers. Meanwhile, the place that his team cleans, that ruined mental hospital, is a sign of how America treats those with mental health issues. *Session 9* establishes brilliantly and consistently a sense of place, and one scene set at night, with a worker alone (maybe...) in the bowels of the hospital is electric in its atmosphere and shocks.

Neil Marshall's *The Descent* (2006) lands at the fourth slot on the list, and it is a butt-kicking, throat-clenching excursion into a nightmare. The idea of the cave—both a literal cave, and the human subconscious mind—is utilized in this story of several women who explore an uncharted cavern system. *The Descent* is a claustrophobic's worst nightmare, and more than that too. It is a descent into a literal and psychological hell from which there is no escape. The most action-packed film to make this list, *The Descent* also features what is perhaps the most effective jump scare of the entire decade. It happens deep in the cave, as a character using a video camera's night-vision function spies a subterranean monster in the group's midst for the first time.

At number five on the list is something completely different. *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* is a wolf in sheep's clothing. It presents itself as a sophisto mockumentary set in a joined universe of slashers, like Jason, Michael and Freddy. But the film actually dissects the conventions of the slasher format and explains how, in reality, they might work. Then, *Behind the Mask* accomplishes another feat. Even after it reveals to the audience how all the slasher trickery is accomplished it manages to be scary *and* make a statement about the connection between slasher and final girl that turns those character types on their heads. Funny and unceasingly smart, this movie is beloved by horror fans and it's easy to see why.

Lake Mungo (2008) comes in next on the list. Like *REC* it is a found footage film, but this effort does what many critics of that format have deemed impossible: it generates and develops a remarkable aspect of dread, terror and sorrow. For many critics, the found footage format is all about running around, herky-jerky cameras and getting lost in the woods. *Lake Mungo* shatters convention and tells the haunting story of a young woman who has died, and the repercussions that her death has on her family. Personal, unsettling, and deeply affecting, *Lake Mungo* reveals just how smart a good found-footage horror movie can be.

Critics didn't have much nice to say about the PG-13 *White Noise* at the time of its release, but the movie's form brilliantly reinforces its content. Opaque barriers—windows, glass walls, even falling water—are constantly deployed to represent the wall separating the world of the living from the world of the dead in the film. The film concerns a man who, mourning the loss of his wife, sets out to destroy that wall, to penetrate those barriers. A ghost story of tremendous power, the film hints at a malicious order (three amorphous silhouettes) beyond human sight or reach, manipulating reality. They thus stand in for the unseen, but always present boogeyman of the 2000s: Osama Bin Laden.

The Strangers (2008) is a terrifying slasher/home-invasion/torture porn effort that focuses on a very 2000s concept: fate. Here, an estranged couple is ruthlessly taunted and attacked at an isolated vacation house simply because they happened to be home. There is no reason—beyond the reason of fate—that this likable couple should be made to suffer as they do. But fate has dictated this outcome for them, and in the post 9/11 world, we instinctively recognize the paradigm. Terror is what happens to them when they are planning their perfect lives. Fate intervenes to destroy all their plans, revealing to them, in the process of the siege, the illusion of safety and security, even in a modern, technological civilization.

Wolf Creek (2005) gets about as close to a new paradigm for road-trip gone wrong horror as has been presented since Tobe Hooper's seminal *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1973). The no learning paradigm commenced by Alfred Hitchcock in *Psycho* (1960) and mastered by Hooper, gets a new wrinkle here, as three victims of a mad serial killer in the Australian Outback are separated and forced to endure their gruesome fates without contact with their friends. Upsetting and traumatic, *Wolf Creek* takes no prisoners. The Head on a Stick scene, a true nightmare, lingers in one's memory.

Coming in at number ten, the last slot on the list, is a zombie apocalypse film of a most unusual

nature: *Pontypool* (2009). This low-budget, independent film suggests that a zombie virus is carried in word, through person-to-person communication. It focuses specifically on talk radio, which the dialogue describes as “risky.” In charting this plague of words, *Pontypool* captured the idea, just as social media was taking off, of citizens moving into separate and impenetrable bubbles of information. There, like tribes, they developed their own mythologies, conspiracy theories and enemies list.

1. *The Ring* (2002)
2. *REC* (2007)
3. *Session 9* (2001)
4. *The Descent* (2006)
5. *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006)
6. *Lake Mungo* (2008)
7. *White Noise* (2005)
8. *The Strangers* (2008)
9. *Wolf Creek* (2005)
10. *Pontypool* (2009)

Other films that earned four stars and are featured in this book are: *American Psycho* (2000), *Battle Royale* (2000), *Final Destination* (2000), *Audition* (2001), *Donnie Darko* (2001), *The Others* (2001), *Hannibal* (2001), *Irreversible* (2002), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *The Grudge* (2004), *Open Water* (2004), *Saw* (2004), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *The Village* (2004), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *Dark Water* (2005), *Kairo* (2005), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *Silent Hill* (2006), *30 Days of Night* (2007), *The Host* (2007), *The Mist* (2007), *Sunshine* (2007), *Teeth* (2007), *Them* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), *Martyrs* (2008), *Carriers* (2009), *Drag Me to Hell* (2009), *Halloween 2* (2009), *House of the Devil* (2009), *Last House on the Left* (2009), *Zombieland* (2009).

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Captivity
Carpenter, Jennifer
Carpenter, John
Carrey, Jim
The Cave
The Cavern
Cavill, Henry
The Cell
CGI (Computer Generated Imagery)
Cheney, Dick
Cherry Falls
The Children
Children of the Corn: Revelation
Clinton, Bill
Cloverfield
Cold Creek Manor
The Cottage
The Covenant
Cox, Courteney
Craven, Wes
Cropsey
Crosby, Denise
Cry_Wolf
Cursed
Curtis, Jamie Lee
Cusack, John
Cuthbert, Elisha

Darkness Falls
David, Warwick
Dawn of the Dead (2004)
Dawning
Day of the Dead
Dead End
Dead Silence
Dead Snow
Deadgirl
Death Proof
Depp, Johnny
The Descent
The Descent 2
The Devil's Rejects
Diary of the Dead
Diesel, Vin
Disturbia
Dog Soldiers
Dominion: The Prequel to the Exorcist
Donnie Darko
Doom
Dorff, Stephen
Dourif, Brad
Dracula 2000
Dracula 3000
Drag Me to Hell
Dreamcatcher
Duchovny, David
Dushku, Eliza

Eden Lake
Eight Legged Freaks
Elba, Idris
Englund, Robert
Evil Things
The Exorcism of Emily Rose
The Exorcist: The Beginning
The Eye

Fassbender, Michael
Fear of Clowns
Feardotcom
Feast
Fido
Fillion, Nathan
Final Destination
The Final Destination

Final Destination 2
Final Destination 3
The Fog (2005)
Ford, Harrison
The Forgotten
The Forsaken
found footage
1408
The Fourth Kind
Fox, Megan
Frailty
Freddy vs. Jason
Friday the 13th (1980)
Friday the 13th (2009)
From Hell
From Within

Gallner, Kyle
Gellar, Sarah Michelle
George, Melissa
Ghost Ship
Gibson, Mel
Ginger Snaps
Ginger Snaps Back
Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed
God's eye camera view
Goldblum, Jeff
Gore, Al
Gothika
Grindhouse
The Grudge
The Grudge 2
The Grudge 3

Haig, Sid
Halloween (1978)
Halloween (Rob Zombie's) (2007)
Halloween (2018)
Halloween: Resurrection
Halloween 2 (1981)
Halloween 2 (2009)
Hannibal
Hannibal: Rising
The Happening
Hard Candy
Harlin, Renny
Harron, Mary
Hartnett, Josh
Hatchet
The Haunting in Connecticut
The Haunting of Molly Hartley
Hellraiser (1987)
Hellraiser: Deader
Hellraiser Hellseeker
Hellraiser: Hellworld
Hellraiser: Inferno
Henriksen, Lance
Henstridge, Natasha
Herzog, Werner
High Tension
The Hills Have Eyes (1977)
The Hills Have Eyes (2006)
The Hills Have Eyes 2 (2007)
The Hills Run Red
The Hitcher (1986)
The Hitcher (2007)
Hodder, Kane
Hollow Man
Holtgrewe, Gregg
Hooper, Tobe
Hopkins, Anthony
The Host
Hostel
Hostel 2
House of 1000 Corpses

House of the Dead
The House of the Devil
House of Wax
Hurricane Katrina

I Am Legend
Ice Cube
I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer
Incident at Loch Ness
Interloper Film
The Invasion
Iraq War
Irreversible
Isabelle, Katharine

J-Horror
Jackson, Samuel L.
Jason X
Jeepers Creepers
Jeepers Creepers 2
Jennifer's Body
John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars
Jovovich, Milla
Joy Ride
Jurassic Park III

Kairo
Keaton, Michael
Keena Monica
Kerry, John
Kidman, Nicole
King, Stephen
Kinnear, Greg

Lake Mungo
Land of the Dead
Last Chance Gas Station
The Last Horror Movie
Last House on the Left (1972)
Last House on the Left (2009)
Latham, William
Lathan, Sanaa
Laurence, Ashley
Leprechaun Back to tha Hood
Leprechaun in the Hood
Let the Right One In
Lillard, Matthew
Linney, Laura
Liu, Lucy
Long Weekend (1978)
Lopez, Jennifer
Lost Souls

Maddrey, Joseph
Madsen, Virginia
The Mangler
The Mangler Reborn
The Mangler 2
Martyrs
May
McDowell, Malcolm
McGowan, Rose
McKee, Lucky
Men Behaving Badly Films
The Messengers
#MeToo
The Midnight Meat Train
Mimic 2
Mirrors
The Mist
Mr. Jingles
Mitchell, Raddha
Moore, Julianne
Mortuary
The Mothman Prophecies

Murphy, Cillian
My Bloody Valentine 3D
My Little Eye

Neo Slasher Films
Noe, Gasper
Noroi: The Curse
Norton, Edward
The Number 23

Obama, Barack
Octane
Old Glory (American flag)
The Omen (1976)
The Omen 666 (2006)
One Missed Call
Open Water
Open Water: Adrift
Orphan
The Orphanage
The Others

Pandorum
Paranormal Activity
Paranormal Entity
Passion of the Christ
Pattinson, Robert
Peli, Orin
Penn, Zak
Perkins, Emily
Pfeiffer, Michelle
PG-13
Pitch Black
Planet Terror
Ponder, Stacie
Pontypool
Posey, Parker
The Poughkeepsie Tapes
Primeval
Psycho Beach Party
P2
Pumpkinhead: Blood Feud

Quaid, Dennis
Quarantine
Queen of the Damned

Raimi, Sam
The Reaping
REC
Red Dragon
Reeves, Keanu
remake syndrome
remakes
Resident Evil
Resident Evil: Apocalypse
Resident Evil: Extinction
Rest Stop
Rest Stop: Don't Look Back
The Return
Return to the House on Haunted Hill
Reynolds, Ryan
Righetti, Amanda
The Ring
The Ring Two
Rise: Blood Hunter
Rodriguez, Robert
Romero, George
Roth, Eli
Route 666
The Ruins
Rumsfeld, Donald
Russell, Kurt

The St. Francisville Experiment

Salva, Victor
Saw
Saw II
Saw III
Saw IV
Saw V
Saw VI
Schrader, Paul
Schreiber, Liev
Schwartz, Jonas
Secret Window
See No Evil
Seed of Chucky
September 11, 2001, terror attacks
Serkis, Andy
Session 9
Seventh Moon
Seyfried, Amanda
Shaun of the Dead
Shrooms
Shutter (2004)
Shutter (2008)
Shyamalan, M. Night
Sick Nurses
Signs
Silent Hill
The Skeleton Key
Skinwalkers
Slither
Smith, Will
Snakes on a Plane
Sorority Row
Soul Survivors
Spader, James
Splinter
Statham, Jason
Stay Alive
The Stepfather
Stewart, Kristen
Stone, Sharon
The Strangers
Sunshine
Supernova
Survival of the Dead
Sutherland, Donald
Sutherland, Kiefer
Swank, Hilary
Swimfan
Tarantino, Quentin
Teeth
Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974)
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning (2006)
Them
Thirteen Ghosts
30 Days of Night
Todd, Tony
The Toolbox Murders
torture porn movies
toxic masculinity
Tremors 3: Back to Perfection
Tremors 4: The Beginning
Triangle
Trickr Treat
Trump, Donald
28 Days Later
28 Weeks Later
Twilight
Twilight: New Moon
Underworld
Underworld: Evolution
Underworld: Rise of the Lycans

Urban Legends: Bloody Mary
Urban Legends: Final Cut

Vacancy
Vacancy 2: The First Cut
Valentine
Van Helsing
video game movies
The Village

Von Trier, Lars

Walker, Paul
The Walking Dead
War on Terror
The Watcher
Welling, Tom
Wes Craven Presents They
West, Alexandra
West, Ti
What Lies Beneath
White Noise
White Noise 2
Willard
Wishmaster 3: Beyond the Gates of Hell
Wishmaster 4: The Prophecy Fulfilled
Wolf Creek
The Woods
Wrong Turn
Wrong Turn 2: Dead End
Wrong Turn 3: Left for Dead

The X-Files (TV series)
The X-Files: I Want to Believe (film)

Zahn, Steve
Zombie, Rob
Zombie, Sheri Moon
The Zombie Diaries
Zombieland
Zombies